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MASKED RIDER
WESTERN
WINTER ISSUE
A THRILLING PUBLICATION
BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS FOR VICTORY!
STAR ON HIS DESK
By HAPSBURG LIEBE
RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK
A Complete Wayne Morgan Novel
By LEE E. WELLS
10¢ RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK A LONG BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
MASKED RIDER WESTERN WINTER 1945

MEN HERE'S THE MOST SENSATIONAL 3 IN 1 OFFER EVER MADE!

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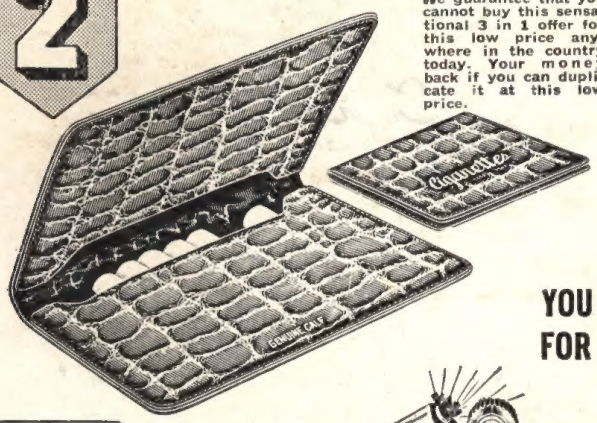
$2.00 Value Smart Alligator Grain CALFSKIN BILLFOLD and Pass Case

Here without a doubt is the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that is being offered today. This smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold is a masterpiece of Billfold design and workmanship. There's a place for everything. The Pass Case, with its 4 celluloid protected pockets, has ample room for cards, passes, lodge and all identification cards. The Wallet has a generous currency compartment in the back and windows for snapshots and identification cards.

2



$1.50 Value Smart Alligator Grain Matching Calfskin Cigarette Case

The handsome Cigarette Case is a fitting companion piece to the Billfold described above. It's made from the same smart Alligator Grain Calfskin and is made to hold a full package of TWENTY CIGARETTES. Each Cigarette Case is reinforced with a hidden metal reinforcement that holds the case in shape and prevents your cigarettes from bending or breaking. The case fits neatly into your vest pocket or breast pocket without bulging.

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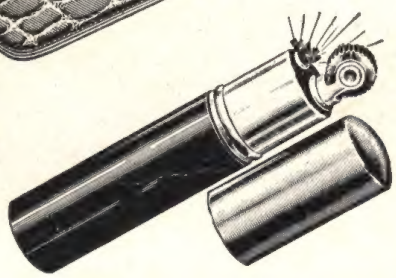
We guarantee that you cannot buy this sensational 3 in 1 offer for this low price anywhere in the country today. Your money back if you can duplicate it at this low price.

50c Value Famous CIGAR LIGHTER

Cigarette Lighters have been plenty scarce. Virtually none have been manufactured for several years now and we feel fortunate in offering you the famous-prewar type, all metal FLAMEMASTER lighter in a beautiful matched two-tone finish. Measuring only 2⅝ inches in length, this "fool-proof" lighter works unfailingly. Just a few drops of fluid and your lighter is ready for months of carefree, unfailing service.

3



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Men everywhere ask us how we can make this sensational 3 in 1 offer for such a low price! Tremendous buying power is the answer. More than 1,000,000 satisfied customers have bought and are using our Billfolds. Don't be misled by the low price! We guarantee this to be $4.00 value or we want you to return the Billfold, Cigarette Case and Cigarette Lighter and **get your money back in full.** You are to be the sole judge. If this sounds to you like a fair, honest-to-goodness, man to man offer—and we're sure you'll agree it does—then fill out the coupon below and rush it to us. We'll ship your smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold, the matching Cigarette Case, and the FLAMEMASTER Lighter, all for $1.98 plus a few cents COD Charges.

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Ask any service man what gifts are most appreciated and you'll find that a Billfold, Cigarette Case and a Lighter are high on the list of most wanted and most useful articles. Imagine how pleased any boy would be to receive all three at one time in a matching set such as this. A gift to last for years and one he'll remember always.

SEND NO MONEY—RUSH THIS COUPON!

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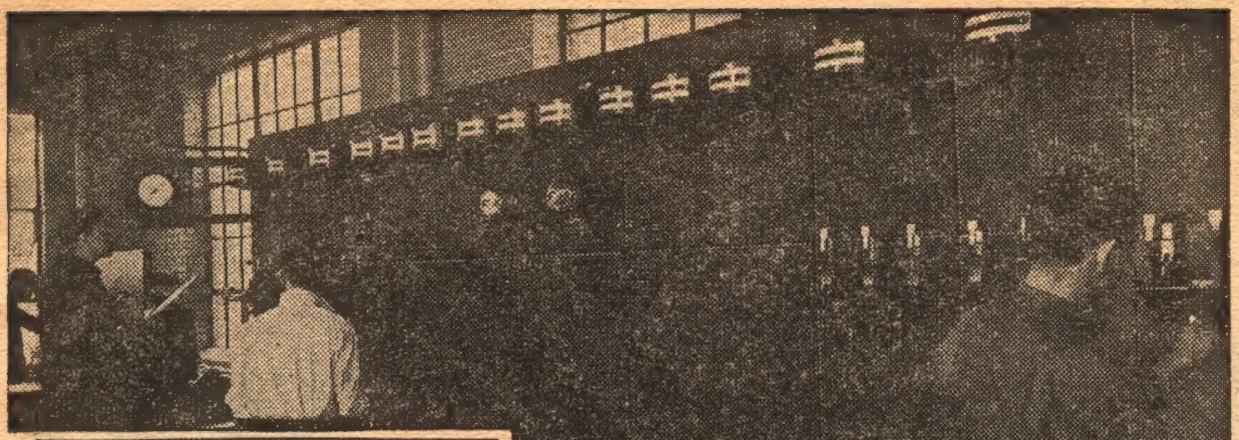
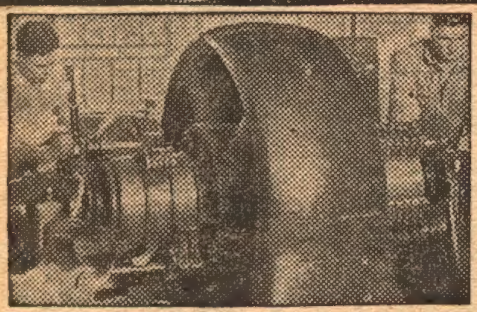
☐ I enclose $1.98 plus 15c tax with my order to save all shipping charges. Ship the 3 articles to me all postage charges prepaid.





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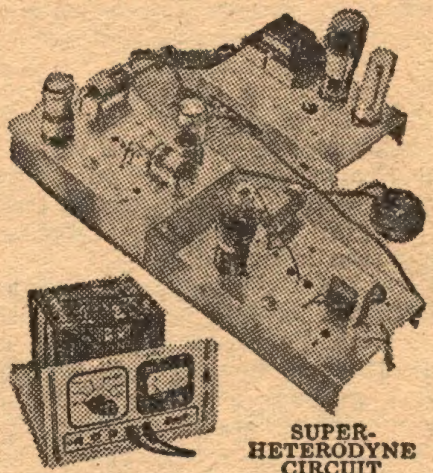

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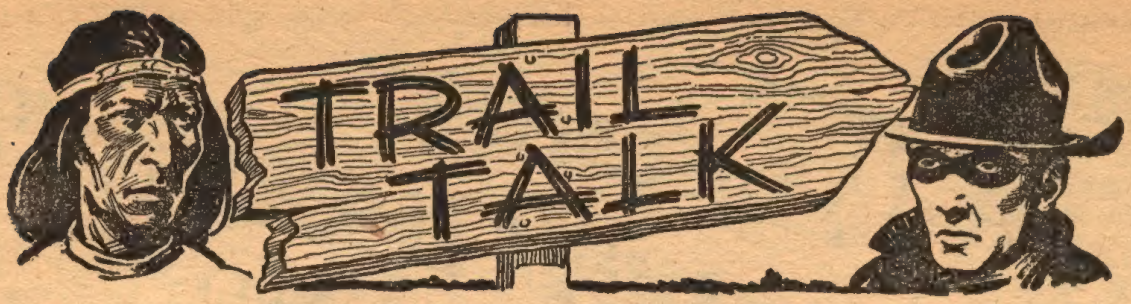

A Department for Readers Conducted by

FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, WADDIES, here we are with our cayuses all saddled and ready for another trail ride and more Trail Talk. Once again we will ride over parts of the once dim and romantic trails of the Old West, and as we ride we will recall some of the many thrilling events that took place along those trails. Events without which there might never have been a West as it is, today, at least not people with thousands and even millions of prosperous, happy and law-abiding citizens.

The trails over which we will ride, or at least a part of them, were once rough trails, not only rough, but dangerous trails where the six-gun was the law, and where every man was a law unto himself.

It was up to the individual to take care of himself. He had to sense the approach of danger and be ready to meet it, and most men felt when they carried a well oiled six-gun or perhaps a couple of them with a rifle for longer range shooting, they were equipped and ready to meet most any emergency that might arise.

They Weren't Afraid

One would imagine that under the conditions that existed in many parts of the West in the early days, that the citizens would be living in constant fear, that any man would be afraid to ride through the rough country alone, but they were not.

They were sometimes a little fearful of being ambushed, or of being set upon by a band of Indians where the numbers would be more than they could hope to cope with, but as a rule they were unafraid, simply cautious. They watched for signs of danger and rode serenely on.

One man, who won much of his reputation by riding alone, was Pete Kitchen, a pioneer Arizona cattleman. Many stories have been told of his alertness, marksmanship, and cool courage.

He was never caught napping. He was as ready with his gun as he was sure of his mark. The Indians were never able to ambush him. Grim experience had taught him to be careful, to watch for Indian "sign" and not only to look ahead while riding through the country, but to take note of anything and everything to either side of the road or trail.

He never traveled the same road twice within a short space of time. If he went to a certain place by one road or trail he was apt to return by another.

A Wary Plainsman

There is a story that has been handed down, and which is said to be true, that gives an idea of just how wary this pioneer plainsman was. It is said that one day while riding along a trail through greasewood, cactus and mesquite, although it was a warm day when most horsemen on a trip of a good many miles might have been dozing in the saddle, Pete was wide awake, and had his double-barrelled shotgun thrown across the bow of his saddle.

He might at a casual glance have seemed oblivious to what was going on in that section, but he was far from it. His keen gaze detected a slight stirring of the bushes in front of him a little way to the right.

The Sixth Sense

That sixth sense of danger that he always seemed to possess must have been with him on that ride, but he gave no outward sign that he had observed anything unusual.

Swinging his gun very quietly into position for quick use, he rode steadily on toward the bush. Just before he reached it, a man leaped suddenly into view with his revolver drawn and called: "Throw up your hands!"

Instantly, with both barrels of his gun

(Continued on page 8)

"I have done so well with my home music lessons I CAN NOW PLAY MANY POPULAR SONGS"

writes Mrs. H. T. McNairy of Detroit, Michigan

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"I said to him, 'I'm not a musician. I'm just taking a home-study course on the piano.' 'You can't fool me,' he said. 'You be here each evening and I'll pay you what I think your music is worth.'

"I've played there ever since and I am getting well paid. So you see I am getting along pretty good, considering that I've only finished less than half my course.

(Signed)

Mrs. H. T. McNairy"

Easy as A-B-C to learn your favorite instrument—costs only 7c a day

HUNDREDS of unsolicited letters in our files tell the same story as the one above. The story of how many people, from all walks of life—doctors, lawyers, teachers, office workers, farmers and laborers—with no previous musical training, have learned to play their favorite instrument this amazing home-study way. How they have learned music quickly, easily . . . without a private teacher . . . *for only 7c a day.*

Yes, over 750,000 people all over the world have studied music this convenient, simple U. S. School way. The reason our method of instruction is so successful is because it makes learning a pleasant pastime. No tiresome scales and exercises . . . no "trick number" or "play-by-ear" methods. You *learn to play by playing* . . . and you enjoy every minute of it.

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And it's just as easy as it sounds . . . thanks to our remarkable "Print and Picture" method. When you take up a new tune, the easy-to-understand printed instructions *tell* you just what to do and how to do it. Next, the big crystal-clear pictures and diagrams *show* you how. Then you play it and *hear* how it sounds. Everything is right before you in black and white. You simply can't go wrong.

If you've always wanted to learn music . . . to be able to entertain yourself and others . . . if you want to be invited everywhere . . . send for our FREE Illustrated Booklet and "Print and Picture" Sample. Then you'll see how easy it is to learn music this money-saving, time-saving way. Check off your favorite instrument. But don't delay. Mail the coupon *now!*

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NOTICE

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Have you Instrument?

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City..... *State*.....

NOTE! If you are under 16 years of age parent must sign coupon.

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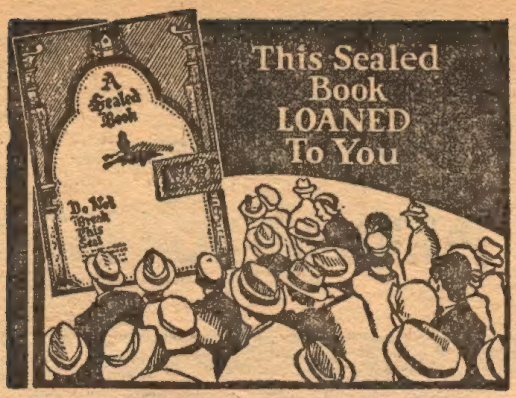

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

cocked, Pete covered the fellow and said: "Throw up your hands." The man dropped his weapon to the ground and threw up his hands, and yelled:

"Don't shoot, Pete! I wasn't going to kill you; I was only going to rob you!"

"Just what I was going to do to you," said Pete. "Shell out!"

The fellow did so, but the amount of money produced was only thirty-five cents. Pete threw him back a quarter, and told him to clear out of the country, and the fellow must have taken the warning as he was never seen by Kitchen again.

Another Arizona Pioneer

There was another character who was wont to travel alone over dangerous trails and country, a kind of "Lone Wolf" of the West. He too was an Arizona Pioneer, a trapper and hunter. He was "Old" Bill Williams, a half mythical, half mysterious character of those early, dangerous days of Arizona when the Apaches held sway and all but drove the white settlers from the country.

No one seems to know where he came from or just when he departed this life, but he did enough so that there is a mountain, a town and a river fork named for him.

No Apache could follow a trail like "Old" Bill Williams. The cleverest Indians at tracking the palefaces could not follow his trail, he was at home in the woods, in the mountains, or on the prairie.

An Expert Strategist

He was a great shot, and a strategist when it came to picking places for his battles, and when so outnumbered that he had

(Continued on page 73)

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asks you to give generously to
YOUR COMMUNITY WAR FUND

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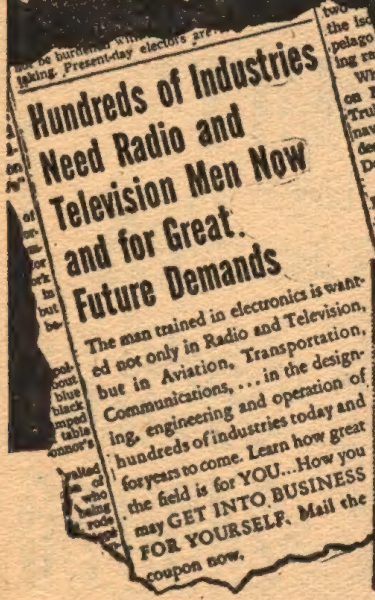

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It is up-to-date—matches the progress constantly being made in modern radio, television and electronics. It is time tested. National Schools has been training men for higher pay and greater opportunity for more than a third of a century. Fill out and mail the coupon below for details.

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A gun blasted, but the slug whined high as Morgan hit leather (CHAPTER V)

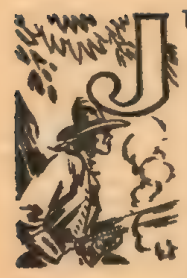
RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK

By LEE E. WELLS

Below the Pecos Ridge, a Fair Valley Becomes a Shambles When Two Outfits Wage a Desperate Feud—Until Wayne Morgan Rides into Action to Make Peace with Grim Gun Logic!

CHAPTER I

War at Rifle Rock



JUST outside of town, two riders pulled up. After a brief consultation, one of them, an Indian, nodded and rode off, headed for the distant peaks, leading the extra horses. The other, a cowboy, waited a few moments, then urged his roan forward with a soft, drawled word. He rode easily, supple body swaying to the movement of the horse, mild blue eyes looking ahead to the town.

Apparently there was only a single street, with a few houses straggling out to either side. The street was dusty and rutted and strangely empty. The cowboy saw two groups of horses hitched before two saloons which were far apart. A single buckboard waited in front of the general store. He saw no other signs of life.

His mild eyes narrowed a trifle, and a steely glint came into them. Something was about to explode in Rifle Rock, that was sure.

He passed the little white church, his swift glance missing nothing. There he had a glimpse of a tall young cowboy talking to a girl. She was beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed. The two stood so that they could not

A Complete Full-Length Masked Rider Novel

be seen from the street. The stranger's wide, generous lips held the shadow of a smile, but that disappeared as he once more felt the tension in the town.

He ambled on up the street, passed the first saloon and pulled in to the rack of the second. He swung out of saddle and his eyes swept over the brands on the horses tethered nearby.

Most of them wore an M Bar C, but there was a smattering of other brands, some of them vented.

The cowboy took the hat from his thick, black, slightly curly hair, and beat the dust from his levis with the hat. He shifted his crossed gun-belts from which depended twin sixes, then turned and walked up the steps and on to the porch of the Winchester saloon.

Pushing through the batwings he stood just inside, blinking, a little blinded by the sudden transition from bright sunshine to cool shadows. Gradually the room came into focus.

There was a long bar, lined by men who had turned and faced him. At the near end a tall, gaunt man with gray hair stood with a shot glass in his hands. Next to him was a smaller, young man, with a dark scowl on his pinched face.

MOST of the rest of the saloon's customers seemed to be cowboys in from the range though the new arrival instantly recognized the breed of others who sat at the tables across the room. The mark showed in their gaunted, wolfish faces, the thin lips and hard, narrowed eyes. He did not have to see the low-tied holsters to recognize those men as gun-slammers.

"Howdy, pilgrim," the man behind the bar said to him jovially. "I reckon yuh want somethin' to cut the dust, huh?"

"That's right."

The stranger walked to the bar, spurs jingling. Two men made way for him and the bartender swiftly filled a shot glass and sat it before him.

"Ride far?" the barkeep asked.

"Some," the strange cowboy admitted.

A glance at the bar mirror showed that the gunhawks at the table were watching him narrowly. Then he saw the old man at the end of the bar push his glass away and pull his hat lower over his wrinkled, tanned face.

"Better be a-ridin', Limp," the old fellow suggested to his companion. "I'll find Rita and we'll slope for home."

The younger man nodded and dropped some silver dollars on the counter. The cowboys at the bar hastily downed their drinks and pushed through the batwings after the old man. The gunhawks, the barkeep and the newly arrived rider remained quiet and unmoving.

"Few strangers come to Rifle Rock, amigo," the barkeep remarked in a friendly tone. "Ain't nothin' much to call 'em here."

"Well, me," this stranger remarked lightly, "I'm just a wandering waddy. Stopped by because I reckoned there might be a job down this way. The handle's Wayne Morgan."

"Glad to know yuh, Morgan. I'm King Gardner. Own the saloon here." The bartender-owner frowned and rubbed his finger-tips along the black line of mustache above his thin, bloodless upper lip. "Reckon yuh come to a mighty poor place for a job, cowboy."

"Ain't there no spreads hereabouts?" Morgan asked, surprised.

"Just two," Gardner answered.

He was a short, thin man, but Morgan had noticed the pantherlike movements that spoke of flowing muscles beneath the white shirt and flowered vest. Gardner had green eyes, flecked strangely with brown. His face was long and oval, almost pale from lack of sun.

His smile was wide and flashing, but Morgan had noticed the shadow of cruelty that lurked in the corner of the lips.

"Snake," Gardner called across to one of the tables, "yuh know of any job in these parts?"

A red-headed giant with broad shoulders lumbered to his feet. He came to the bar, his narrowed gray eyes weighing Morgan, dropping briefly to the twin sixes at the cowboy's slender hips. His eyes traveled upward along the lean, muscled body, the gray shirt, the tanned face.

Morgan might have been called handsome. His jaw was lean and long and hard. His full lips seemed on the verge of smiling but there was also the suggestion that they could set in grim, hard lines. His eyes, so mild and blue, were spaced well apart.

"There's gunhands to be hired and I reckon that's all," Snake finally answered, and spat into the sawdust. He shifted his gun-belt.

"Sounds like a trouble range." Morgan frowned slightly.

"The gent that just left here," Gordon sighed, "is Zack McCloud, owner of the M Bar C. The other spread is the Diamond H, run by Buck Henry and his son. Them two spreads is right on the edge of smokin' one another."

"Why?" Morgan demanded.

"Rustlin's. Both blames the other. Morgan, yuh'd best ride out of Rifle Valley and forget a job around here."

Morgan nodded, though the nod might have meant anything. In the mirror he caught the quick signal of the man called "Snake." For a fleeting second, Gordon's lips set and his head jerked perceptibly. Snake turned on his boot heel and walked out the door. The rest of the men started drifting toward the porch.

Nothing had been said, but Morgan felt the tension growing. King Gardner talked to him with only half attention, for the saloon man's green eyes were centered on the street. Something was about to happen.

WAYNE MORGAN

Morgan knew it as well as if he had been told.

"I reckon I'll be ridin' along," he said abruptly.

Gardner turned sharply.

"No hurry," he said swiftly. "Here, have a drink on the house."

"No, thanks," Morgan answered. He moved toward the door.

Gardner took a step toward the end of the bar as though he intended to stop Morgan. He pulled up short, eyes narrowing with a sudden thought, then moved toward the big window and looked out on the street.

Morgan saw the M Bar C men gathered around the buckboard out there. The girl he had seen beside the church came along the street, joined the group and climbed into the buckboard. Zack McCloud came out of the store and paused a moment in the doorway to light a cigar.

BY SHEER luck Morgan happened to glance up the empty street just at the instant a rifle cracked, a flat sound like two boards slapping together. McCloud stiffened and the cigar dropped out of his lips. He hinged at the waist like a puppet falling. His men stared at him, for the moment too stunned and paralyzed to move. But none of them except Morgan had seen the wisp of smoke behind the false front of a building down the street next to the other saloon, the Gunsight.

The Gunsight's batwings flew open and cowboys streamed onto the porch. Morgan's swift glance cut to the M Bar C men. The girl sat frozen, staring at the old man sprawled on the walk. The man named "Limp" suddenly spun around, his hand slapping down to his holster.

"They killed him!" he bawled. "Wipe out them Diamond H sons!"

His six blurred up and he threw a slug at the Gunsight. A cowboy there yelled in pain and surprise.

Morgan ducked back inside the Winchester as gunfire broke out with a deadly roar. Gardner still stood by the window, a strange half-smile on his face that vanished as Morgan bulged in. Morgan paid no atten-

tion to him but ran for the back. He jerked open a door, sped down a short hall, then jumped outside.

He cut sharply to the right. From the street, the sound of the battle between the spreads rose to a crescendo. Morgan, tight-lipped, sped on, heading for the Gunsight and the building just beyond where the ambusher had lurked.

He was still some distance away when he saw a man holding a rifle come sliding down the pitch of the roof. The man jumped from the eaves, hitting the sandy ground on hands and knees. Morgan's hands blurred down to his holsters and his guns snaked out. He placed a warning shot close to the man's head. Sand spurted and the bushwhacker's head jerked up.

Morgan saw a red-stubbled face, coarse and brutal. The thick lips were pulled down at one corner by a scar that disappeared under the heavy jaw-bone.

Muddy eyes glittered venomously.

Over the roar of the guns from the street Morgan did not hear the new six that joined in the thunder from somewhere in back of him. He was not aware of it until his hat sailed from his head and a second slug sang hornet-like close to his ear.

He plowed to a halt, whirled, crouching, his guns glittering up. He saw no one and, for a moment, his jaw dropped. Then he cut back toward the bushwhacker who had dropped from the roof. He saw the man disappear around the corner of the building. Morgan cut after him, the eyes cold and hard, sixes gripped firmly. But before he could overtake his quarry the man had reached the street and slipped around the corner of the building.

Morgan raced after him. He didn't understand any of the trouble that had broken out, but he did know that the stubble-bearded gunslinger was the man who had downed Zack McCloud. He whirled around the far corner and he saw a blank store front, dusty windows and a closed door to which he leaped. It was locked.

A bullet smashed into the panels close to his head and Morgan ducked. He whirled around, facing the street. Another bullet cut close and Morgan realized then that he had drawn the fire from the men in the Gunsight.

The buckboard disappeared up the street in a cloud of dust. M Bar C men kept up a constant fire on the Gunsight, but they worked their way down the far end of the street, intent on leaving town. Morgan did not return the fire from the saloon but ducked around the far corner of the building. He had no quarrel with the Diamond H and could not understand why they had fired on him. At the moment any man with guns in his fists was an enemy.

He shoved the sixes back in their holsters and ran around to the back of the building. Out in front the firing slackened, then stopped altogether. Approaching the Winchester from the rear, Wayne Morgan halted, looked back to where he had first seen the bushwhacker. He rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Rifle Valley promises to be plumb interestin'," he was thinking. "Two spreads feudin' with one another, bushwhackers hidin' behind false fronts and a couple of slugs that come at me from nowheres, looked like. Now why was someone plumb serious in keepin' me from nabbing that killer? And who tried to salivate me?"

He stared speculatively at the closed rear door of the Winchester and thoughtfully shook his head. His wide lips set a little grimly, then he walked on into the saloon.

King Gardner was still behind the bar and the gunhawks were coming back into the saloon.

Morgan looked at all of them sharply. Any one of them could have tried to get him out back.

But Morgan had one bit of satisfaction. He had not caught the ambusher, but he would know the man if he ever saw him again.

CHAPTER II

Hangnoose Party

IN the Gunsight, "Buck" Henry wiped his bald head and let out his breath in a loud "whoosh" of relief. He was a small man, short and stubby. Fierce blue eyes blazed at the world from beneath grizzled white brows. His face was round, tanned, the full cheeks almost without a wrinkle despite the fringe of white hair that tufted just above his ears.

His gun-belt was looped under a round paunch. He shoved his gun in the holster and turned from the shattered window.

"They've gone," he said. "The shootin's over. Jed, take the boys and hit the grit for the ranch. Get there pronto."

His son to whom he spoke still held a Colt limply in his hand. His steady eyes were clouded and troubled. He was tall and slender, but he had Buck's round face and his blue eyes. A lock of thick brown hair dropped rebelliously over his forehead and he impatiently brushed it aside.

"Buck," he said, "they figger we salivated Zack." There was a deep note of pain and trouble in his voice.

Buck Henry's lips tightened and he nodded.

"Shore they figger like that. But when Limp Denton went plumb loco and started

A rope had been flipped over the limb when a rifle slammed with startling suddenness (CHAPTER III)

slingin' lead there wasn't no time then to walk out and say we didn't have anything to do with it."

"Rita will hate us, Buck. I was just talkin' to her—" Jed broke off short and cursed. "What's the use! I'd like to get the jasper who shot McCloud!"

"I aim to, boy!" Buck blazed. "It's the only thing that'll keep the M Bar C from gunsmoke. We got to get that man, whoever he is. Now you get the boys and ride to the ranch. No tellin' when Limp Denton will bring his boys back to the range."

Jed shrugged and spoke a brief word to the Diamond H cowboys. Two of them were wounded slightly but able to ride. Angered by the attack, they were for riding after the M Bar C but Jed harshly ordered them to saddle and hit for home. They rode warily out of Rifle Rock, with Jed at their head.

Buck Henry watched them go and sighed with relief when they left town without trouble. He dropped some money on the bar before the dazed proprietor.

"That'll pay for the damage done here, Gus," he said. "I hope I can collect it from the M Bar C some time."

As he walked out, and down the planked sidewalk toward the distant sheriff's office he was wondering where the lawman had been during the brief fracas. Mort Hatcher, it seemed, was always sheriffing somewhere else when trouble broke.

Buck Henry hesitated before the Winchester, frowned at the batwings for a second. On sudden decision, he walked inside.

King Gardner smiled at him from the bar. A strange waddy stood by the window, a man with mild blue eyes and crossed guns, tied low. Henry spotted the red-headed gunslammer, Snake Bannon, seated at a table in the far corner. Henry's lip curled a little but he walked directly to the bar. The strange cowboy half turned, but said nothing.

"You saw the shootin' King?" Buck Henry demanded.

"Reckon there wasn't anybody in Rifle Rock who didn't, Buck," Gardner replied. His smile left and lines of sorrow came into his face. "Zack wasn't the kind of gent who deserved back-shootin', Buck. Your boys shore went loco there."

Henry's fist doubled up on the bar. "None of my boys done it, King," he announced flatly. "I was with the whole bunch in the Gunsight. First thing we heard was a rifle shot. We rushed outside and Limp Denton started slingin' slugs at us. Naturally, we didn't stay to argue none."

King Gardner didn't say anything but his silence showed his disbelief. Buck Henry saw that and his face flushed an angry red. Snake Bannon cleared his throat noisily and rose from the table. He advanced to the bar, one hand close to his Colt. His thick lips were spread in an insulting smile.

"We was all right here, Henry," Snake said. "We could see every one of the M Bar C rannies right over there across the street with the buckboard. The shot came from down yore way. Ain't nobody we know but Diamond H that don't like McCloud."

Buck Henry spun around, bristling. Snake waited, the leer still on his lips, and his fingers taloned slightly above his gun. Henry caught the gesture and gained control of his anger.

"I don't savvy this whole deal," he snapped. "I know my boys is clear. I'll prove it to yuh."

"How?" Snake asked, arching his thick brows.

"I don't know yet—but I will." Henry glared around the room and his eyes rested suspiciously on the stranger. "Where you from?" he demanded.

"Yonderly. The handle's Wayne Morgan, ridin' chuckline."

Buck Henry's eyes dropped to the low-tied holsters and suspicion grew stronger in his eyes.

"Gunslammer by the looks of yuh," he growled. "Part of Snake Bannon's crew here?"

"Yuh're readin' the wrong sign, amigo," Morgan drawled. "I ain't a gunslammer and I ain't with Bannon. If the McCloud thing is in yore crew, I was right in here when the shootin' happened."

"Then how come I saw yuh with drawn gun next to the Gunsight when the lead was flyin'?" Henry demanded.

"I was chasin' the gent that shot McCloud," Morgan answered flatly.

A DEAD silence held the room and all attention centered on Morgan. Henry didn't seem to feel the sudden tension. He looked angrily at Morgan, then snorted in disgust and turned brusquely away.

"I reckon yuh was, bein' a strange waddy," he said shortly. "Gardner, next time Denton or any of the M Bar C boys is in, tell 'em the Diamond H didn't salivate Zack. I don't reckon they'll believe it, but at least they'll have heard my side."

"I'll tell 'em," Gardner answered. He pulled his eyes away from Morgan, managed a thin smile at Buck Henry and shrugged.

"Tell 'em just the same," Henry snapped and walked out.

Distantly all attention centered back on Morgan. Gardner moved down the bar and Snake Bannon came close. Morgan met their harsh stares levelly, a slight question in his eyes.

"Did yuh see the gent that shot at Zack?" Bannon growled.

Morgan took his time in answering. He saw that Gardner held the bar cloth in a tight grip. The gunhawks edged closer,

forming a careful ring about him, but no fear showed in his face. He grinned broadly and spread his hands in a disarming gesture.

"What else could I tell that proddy bantam? Did yuh want me to say I was gunnin' for Diamond H?"

"Just what was yuh doin'?" Bannon asked suspiciously.

"I started to hightail when trouble broke, aimin' to get out of a fight that was none of my business. When lead is slung around plumb careless-like, who wouldn't have Colts in his fists? Now if yuh don't mind, I reckon I'll ride out of town while it's peaceful."

Gardner flashed a quick glance at Bannon and shook his head slightly. The big red-headed renegade sank back on his heels but his face still mirrored scowling suspicions. Morgan pushed by him and walked out the door. He swung into saddle and headed the roan out of town, going at a fast gait.

Back inside the Winchester, Gardner scratched his head.

"Let him go," he said to Snake Bannon. "If he leaves town, there ain't no need to worry about him."

In the meantime, Buck Henry had crossed to the sheriff's office. Mort Hatcher sat at his desk, busy cleaning and oiling a gun. He looked up, and his bloodless lips flattened when he saw Henry. He placed the gun on the desk top.

"Yuh shure ought to be proud of yoreself, Henry," he growled. "I ought to arrest the whole Diamond H. Lucky Zack wasn't killed."

"That's the first good news I've heard," Buck Henry said, with obvious relief. Then his anger surged up.

Hatcher towered a good foot above Buck. He was a beefy man with huge arms and legs. With good features and a high-arched nose, and a crop of crisp dark hair, he might have been considered good-looking had it not been for his muddy eyes which were shifty. Now one cheek was rounded with an enormous quid of tobacco. The star gleamed brightly on a dirty black vest that covered an even dirtier shirt.

Despite the man's size Buck Henry bristled up like a bantam rooster.

"Get this straight, Mort, and don't yuh forget it! No Diamond H bullet got Zack."

"Now that sounds plumb likely," Hatcher grunted disdainfully. "Ain't nobody else that'd profit from his death. The shot shore came from the Gunsight."

Buck Henry held himself stiff and taut. "Hatcher," he repeated, "I'm tellin' yuh we didn't shoot Zack."

"Then who did?" Hatcher looked up, muddy eyes glinting. The sneer on his thick lips was plainer.

"I—don't know. It wasn't us."

Hatcher's hand slapped down on the desk top.

"I'm waitin' to see what happens to Zack," he announced. "If he dies, I reckon I'll be ridin' out to the Diamond H with a posse. Mebbe by then yuh can brand this unknown killer gent. Yuh'd better—or every hombre out there'll wish he hadn't been born. That's all, Buck, and yuh got a warnin'."

Buck Henry stared speechlessly at the lawman, suddenly realizing in what a bad spot Zack's death would place the whole Diamond H. He opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. Without another word he stamped out of the office and down the street back toward the Gunsight. He mounted his horse and neck-reined it around, headed for the Diamond H.

He rode at a slow gait, buried deep in thought. He hardly saw any part of the long familiar trail, for his thoughts milled ceaselessly around the shooting of McCloud. But he got nowhere.

He had an impulse to turn back and tear Rifle Rock apart, searching for the man who had done the ambushing. But he had nothing to go on, no idea who the man might be. Buck Henry cursed deeply and fervently, and tried to dismiss the problem for the moment.

He approached a deep cut in the road that led westward through Diamond H range to the distant Pecos Ridge and the mines beyond. The road narrowed here and the wide canyon was brush-choked, boulder-strewn.

LOOKING ahead, he could see the wide plain beyond the cut, appearing almost blood red in the setting sun. Already purple haze had touched the distant Pecos Ridge and soon would spill down into Rifle Valley as the sun dipped lower beyond the granite peaks. Henry's thoughts centered on the red glow in the sky. Like blood, he thought, the blood that might easily flow between the two spreads.

"Grab some air, hombre!" a rough voice snapped.

Henry jerked his head around. He caught the gleam of light from a rifle barrel shoved through the bushes, heard a crackling to his right and left, and realized that he was surrounded. His arms climbed slowly upward and he stopped the horse by a pressure of his knees.

"Now that's right neighborly," the rough voice said with heavy sarcasm. "Pull his fangs, boys."

Men appeared out of the brush. Each wore a neckerchief over his mouth and nose and had his hat pulled low. Buck Henry recognized none of them. The cloth muffled the voice of the man with the rifle, yet there was something vaguely familiar about it.

A masked man came close, six-gun leveled on Henry's chest. He gingerly emptied the rancher's holster and stepped back.

"He ain't goin' to bite no more," he called.

The rest of the men worked out of the brush, circling in closer until they ringed Buck Henry with menacing Colts. The rifleman, a big man with broad, hurling shoulders, and masked like the rest, stepped clear.

"What yuh want with me?" Henry demanded in a level voice.

"We're payin' a debt, hombre," the rifleman answered in a chilling tone. "Yuh shot Zack, so I reckon we'll stretch yore neck at the end of a rope." He snapped an order to his men. "Bring the hosses."

Henry felt a cold chill finger his spine but allowed none of his fear to show. His eyes sparked and his mouth set grimly.

Some of the men disappeared back in the brush. Fresh cracklings told of horses being led to the road. Buck Henry watched as the men swung into saddle. At no time did less than three Colts cover him. He noted the coil of rope on the saddle of the big masked man.

"Up the road a piece, hombre," the man ordered Buck. "We got a big old cottonwood already picked out. I don't reckon there'll be any more drygulchin' after we've left you as a warnin'."

The rancher slowly lowered his hands. The masked riders closed in around him and in silence they rode up the cut and came out on the plain.

There Buck Henry saw the grove of trees and the big cottonwood standing out from the rest. Despite all he could do, he felt his throat constrict as though the burning, choking rope was already around it.

CHAPTER III

Trouble Trail

SILENTLY the masked band surrounding the Diamond H owner rode up to the big cottonwood and halted. Buck Henry, face pale, but set in firm, uncompromising lines, waited, hoping for the smallest chance to make his bid for freedom. But the men around him did not give him any loop-hole.

The big; hulking leader led the rancher's horse to a position under a stout limb. He picked up the coiled rope and swiftly started forming a hangman's loop. The rest waited in a deadly silence. The man finally finished, turned the rope over as though examining his handiwork. He looked up.

"I reckon yuh know why we're doin' this?" he demanded.

"I don't," Buck Henry snapped.

"Yuh tried to kill Zack McCloud or ordered the shootin' done. Ain't no decent citizen goin' to sit around on his hunkers and let yuh get away with it."

"Decent citizens!" Buck Henry sneered. "Yuh're a bunch of mangy polecats. I had nothin' to do with the shootin' of Zack."

There was a moment of silence. Then the big man leaned out of the saddle and with a quick flip of the wrist settled the noose over Henry's neck. The rancher reached for it, but instantly two of the others grabbed his arms and forced them behind his back. He felt the rope lash across and around his wrists. It was done quickly.

The big man adjusted the noose, placing the knot under Henry's left ear, then moved back, sitting his horse, silent and grim.

"I reckon yuh can say yore piece," he said grudgingly. "But make it fast and short. We don't aim to waste much time."

Buck Henry's eyes blazed at him, but he said no word. He made no struggle to free his hands. He sat straight and stiff like a courageous man.

The masked man waited a moment, then shrugged. He lifted his eyes to the big limb and had flipped the rope over it when a rifle slammed with startling suddenness. The big man's horse bucked with violence, throwing the man over its head. The animal fled.

Instant confusion struck the masked band. Sixes were jerked from leather and blasted in the direction of the shot. Then two six-guns came into action from another direction. A masked man screamed, swayed, then grabbed the saddle-horn. The big renegade came to his feet and his guns, too, were going.

The rifle cracked again and a man dropped to the ground like a poled ox. The men fired wildly. Buck Henry held his skittish horse with pressure of his knees, a wild light of hope in his eyes.

"Grab that hurt man up!" the big man yelled hoarsely. "Get out of here. It's the Diamond H!"

The would-be hangman vaulted up behind another rider, sending a blasting fire into the trees. Under its cover, the fallen man was picked up and slung over a horse. The band wheeled, and set spurs, racing off toward the deep cut in the roadway. Hidden six-guns and a rifle sent them on their way. A few twisted around to return the fire, but most of them leaned low over their horses and spurred them on faster.

The pounding drum of hoofs faded away. Buck Henry sat quietly, the rope still around his neck, his arms pinioned tightly behind his back. He looked eagerly toward the trees, but could see nothing in the dense brush. Twilight was falling and the shadows clustered thick beneath the trees. Then out of their depths came the eerie call of the mountain lion, a sound Buck Henry had not heard in years. He felt the few hairs above his ears prickle and rise.

Abruptly a man on a magnificent black stallion rode around a heavy clump of bushes. The rancher stared at him, mouth agape.

The man was tall and slender, with broad shoulders, deep chest, tapering down to a narrow waist circled by two gun-belts. He wore a black, high-crowned hat and a black cloak hung from his shoulders, almost concealing his body.

The rider came closer. Buck Henry saw then that he wore a black domino mask, beneath which wide, full lips smiled. The jaw was long, firm. Henry continued to stare as the man came closer and spoke in a deep voice.

"Yuh came mighty close to trouble, friend. Lucky I happened to be around."

Buck Henry found his own voice. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm called the Masked Rider here and there."

HE LOOKED again at the masked man. The blue eyes behind the domino mask looked friendly enough now, but Buck sensed that they could look as chill as the black bores of leveled Colts. The waning light caught faint reflections on the blue steel of the heavy guns holstered snugly to each lean hip.

So this was the famous Robin Hood of the ranges, the outlaw, the Masked Rider, whose name was spoken fearfully throughout the West. To mention him around chuckwagon fires, in lonely bunkhouses, or the saloons of the cowtowns, started heated

BLUE HAWK

The man's long, powerful arm reached out and pulled the noose over the Diamond H owner's head. He dropped the rope to the ground. Henry caught a flicker of movement close at hand and his glance jerked in that direction.

He looked straight at a bronze-faced Indian, dressed in a white shirt and trousers with a sash around his waist in which he carried a sheath-knife. His long, dark hair almost touched his shoulders and was tied back from his face by a bright-colored band of cloth. Henry judged him to be a Yaqui, of that tribe of fierce fighting men from below the Arizona border. He wore no six-gun but there was a rifle in the saddle boot beneath his right leg. He rode a wiry gray that looked small beside the big black stallion.

"The Masked Rider!" Buck Henry breathed.

arguments. There were a thousand stories about the Masked Rider, few of them true, most of them false and distorted. But all told of this fighting fury on horseback who battled to help the oppressed and the downtrodden, though he himself was counted as an outlaw.

Henry recalled that, though young, the Masked Rider's past was a sealed book. Rumor had it that those firm lips never spoke of it even to the Yaqui, Blue Hawk, who was his constant companion and friend. Even his real name was unknown to any man but himself.

Despite the thousands of stories, no one knew what had caused the Masked Rider to become a Robin Hood outlaw. But what-

ever his past, there were hundreds who would give their lives for him, because he had ridden to their aid when their need was greatest.

For all Buck Henry had heard, though, there were many things he did not know about the Masked Rider. He could not know that this supple, tall, masked man was also the wandering cowboy whom he himself had challenged back in the Winchester. There was no way he could guess that the Masked Rider often assumed the rôle of Wayne Morgan, a puncher with a characteristic, slow drawl and easy manners. And he was convincing in the role, since he was a good cowhand, and time and again he had proved that he could be tophand on any spread.

"They are gone, senor," the Indian said in a quiet voice. He had been educated in a mission school and spoke English well, but he clipped his words short so that at times they sounded harsh, Indianlike.

"Good, Blue Hawk." The Masked Rider smiled. "Keep a watch on the road while Mr. Henry and I talk things over."

"Yuh know my name?" Buck Henry exclaimed in amazement.

"Among other things," the Masked Rider answered gravely, as he cut the ropes that bound Buck's hands. "But there's much more about this valley that I'd like to know. Yore recent companions seemed right determined to stretch yore neck."

"M Bar C rannies, I reckon," Henry answered slowly. He shook his head. "Probably hotheads. I don't reckon Zack or Rita would allow a trick like that."

The Masked Rider swung easily out of saddle and Buck Henry followed him. They sat down under the thick limbs of the cottonwood as the evening shadows deepened. Blue Hawk disappeared as silently as he had come.

Despite his knowledge that this man beside him was a hunted outlaw, the rancher felt a deep sense of security.

"This has all the earmarks of a range war," the Masked Rider said quietly. "I'd like to know more about it."

"Shucks, it's no different from a hundred other range wars," Henry answered soberly. He waved his arm back toward Rifle Rock and then in a wide arc that included the Pecos Range to the north. "This whole of Rifle Valley is divided between two spreads. My Diamond H is up this way, and Zack McCloud's M Bar C is south of Rifle Rock, the only town in these parts. Zack and me rode in here together forty years ago and established our spreads. There ain't been a sign of trouble between us until lately."

"What's happened?" the Masked Rider asked.

"Trouble just reared up all of a sudden and slapped her brand on the Valley," Henry answered sadly. "First, Jed—he's my son—and me began to miss some Diamond H cows. Jed trailed 'em and each time they led south, onto M Bar C range. I couldn't imagine Zack doin' any rustlin'. Him and me had been friends for years. His daughter and Jed was some sweet on each other. Still are, if this blamed trouble would clear up."

"How many head did yuh miss?"

"Just a few at a time, but it's kept up. Then some jasper put a couple of slugs through the ranchhouse winders. We never had no trace of him but it could have been an M Bar C warnin'. Yuh see, about that time Zack started rampagin' about losin' cow-critters. He claimed the Diamond H had gone plumb loco."

"Looks as if there's a third party in this deal somewheres," the Masked Rider said, "playin' both sides against the middle."

"I thought of that," Henry agreed. "I've seen it done before. But there ain't another cattleman in these parts exceptin' me and Zack. Ain't nobody can gain a thing stirrin' up trouble. So far as I can figger, there's only one answer."

"I'd like to hear it." The Masked Rider nodded.

"McCloud's gone land greedy. I know the Diamond H has lost cows. It's been a steady drain, and every time they head into M Bar C range. McCloud claims we've stole some of his. It ain't so. It sounds to me like somebody over there is tryin' to raise a rumpus to cover their own stealin'."

THE Masked Rider was silent for a while. Buck Henry stole several glances at him, eyes full of questioning. He looked back toward Rifle Rock and sighed.

"Zack got shot today in town," he said mournfully, "and the Diamond H is bein' blamed for it. They claim we drygulched him from the Gunsight Saloon. But not one of the boys in the Gunsight was away from the bar. It's goin' to bring trouble, though, plenty of it. Limp Denton ain't goin' to let it ride, no matter how much Rita and Zack might try to hold a check-rein on him."

"Who's Limp Denton?"

"Segundo for the M Bar C. Zack ramrods the M Bar C hisself. Limp's a young'n just come in to the valley mebbe two years ago. He picked up a rustler bullet down in Texas and his hip never did heal right."

"From Texas, eh?" the Masked Rider said musingly. "Is that all yuh know about him?"

"Just about all." Buck Henry nodded. "Seems to be a hard-workin' and ambitious gent. Got a temper like a prairie fire, though. He sort of figgered one time he could hitch up with Rita, but she made it mighty clear Jed was the one she wanted. I expected him to go on a rampage but he never did."

The Masked Rider straightened up and looked about over the range. When he spoke,

slowly, his deep voice showed he was thoughtful.

"Only two spreads here and no other cattleman. Yet things still look like a third party in the deal somewheres." On sudden inspiration he asked, "How about minerals?"

"Ain't none to amount to much. There's big copper mines beyond the Pecos Ridge and experts looked over the Valley several years ago. They didn't find enough to start any new mines here."

"Yuh're makin' it harder by the minute." The Masked Rider chuckled ruefully.

"Amigo, it is hard!" Buck Henry answered swiftly. "I've done thought her over till I'm tired of thinkin' any more."

"But still there is trouble," the Masked Rider snapped grimly. "It might be caused by the M Bar C, or by somebody yet unknown. Yuh're facin' a range war and there's been blood spilled already. That has to be stopped and whoever is behind the trouble brought out in the open."

"Sounds hard to do," Henry stated dryly.

"It will be. How about somebody in Rifle Rock?"

"What would they gain? There ain't no cattlemen there that'd know how to handle range like this. Some mighty tough gents in Rifle Rock might rustle a few cows, but they couldn't figger up the trouble that's hit us."

"How about King Gardner?" the masked man asked.

"Not King, least of all," the rancher said positively. "He's a smooth gent and I don't like him much, but he's a saloonkeeper and wouldn't know the front end of a cow from the back, a brandin' iron from a remuda. I can't point nothin' at Gardner."

The Masked Rider turned to the black stallion, waiting patiently near-by.

"Looks as if Rifle Valley needs some investigatin'," he said grimly. "Mr. Henry, can yuh keep yore Diamond H boys in line? Not start any trouble or do any fightin' no matter what comes along?"

"I reckon I could." The rancher nodded slowly. He looked up. "Yuh plannin' to take chips in this?"

"Might," the Masked Rider answered. "At least I'm goin' to look around a bit. If I find out anything I'll let yuh know at the Diamond H."

"Glory be!" Buck Henry breathed.

The Masked Rider smiled slightly.

"Oh, another thing. There's a wanderin' waddy came in to the valley today. I've been keepin' close watch on him and he's all right. If he happens to ride up some day, he might have a message from me. Keep yore boys at home and keep their sixes holstered. I'll see yuh later."

He swung lithely into saddle, neck-reined the stallion. The magnificent beast plunged off into the night, in the direction of Rifle Rock. Soon Buck Henry could no longer hear the pound of the horse's hoofs. Slowly he started for the Diamond H.

"The Masked Rider done took chips," he breathed. "I reckon we'll get somewheres now. Wait'll I tell Jed!"

He pulled up sharply. From out of the night came the distant cry of a mountain lion. He listened, but it was not repeated. At last he rode on down the trail to the Diamond H.

CHAPTER IV

Gun Trap

BLUE HAWK came out of the night, answering the Masked Rider's call. He swung in beside his companion and the two cut off the road, heading across the range to a hide-out in the canyons along the west mountain wall of the Valley. They rode silently and at a good speed, but always two pairs of keen eyes searched the dark range ahead and to either side. At last the canyon closed about them.

They came out on a small "hole," complete with grass and a little spring. The roan and the pinto they always carried with them for any needed extra mounts, and the camp gear had already been put in order by Blue Hawk. The two men dismounted and the Yaqui took the Masked Rider's stallion and his own gray to pasture them with the others. By the time he returned, the Masked Rider had a small fire going.

The Masked Rider opened his bed-roll. The black Stetson and cloak disappeared and the domino mask with it. When he returned to the fire he was again Wayne Morgan, and even his voice seemed to have changed to a softer drawl as he said something to himself aloud. He busied himself with bacon, and rolls of dough on a stick. Soon the simple meal was ready, and when it had been eaten Wayne Morgan nursed his coffee as he looked across the flames at Blue Hawk.

"What yuh think of Rifle Valley?" he asked.

"Trouble is here, Senor," Blue Hawk answered quietly.

"Yuh're right." Morgan nodded. He told Blue Hawk what had happened in Rifle Rock and the story Buck Henry had told. "Seems like there plumb has to be somethin' beside grass and cows behind this. Minerals, mebbe, or somethin' like that."

"Blue Hawk will ride the Valley," the Yaqui said quietly. "To watch the rocks and see."

"You do that. Me, I'm ridin' back to Rifle Rock. Seems like somebody ought to know

who shot McCloud. I might take a pasear out to the M Bar C, too."

"I will meet you when?" Blue Hawk asked.

"Here, tomorrer night. If I ain't around, check Rifle Rock before yuh ride out to the M Bar C. I might try to get on the payroll at that spread."

"You think this ranch is at the bottom of the trouble?" the Yaqui asked.

"I doubt it," Wayne Morgan answered thoughtfully, "but yuh never can tell in a deal like this. There's some tricky polecat somewheres. I'm certain of it."

Blue Hawk nodded and stared into the fire. Finally Morgan arose and stretched.

"We'd better hit our soogans, amigo. Tomorrer might be right tirin'."

The fire died down to low embers as the two companions of the trails rolled up in their blankets. Peaceful night settled over Rifle Valley, but somewhere hate and greed plotted to rip the range apart in clouds of gunsmoke.

Early the next morning the two men rode out of the canyon hide-out. With only a brief word they parted, Blue Hawk heading toward the distant Pecos Ridge and Wayne Morgan, on the roan, going at an easy canter toward Rifle Rock.

The town looked peaceful and drowsy in the morning sunshine and it was hard to believe that the single, quiet street had only yesterday been a battlefield. Morgan slowed the roan and ambled lazily into town, looking like a waddy who had few cares in the world.

He pulled up to the Winchester hitch-rack and dismounted. A swamper who was sweeping the porch gave him only a sleepy glance as Morgan pushed through the batwings.

The saloon was empty except for a mournful-faced bartender the cowboy had not seen before. The man looked at Morgan solemnly, sighed and reached for a shot glass. He had it filled and ready by the time Morgan reached the bar.

"The first drink of the mornin' is on King Gardner, pilgrim," he said.

"You got it this time."

"Thanks," Morgan drawled. He downed the drink and half turned, watching the street. "Been any more trouble since yesterday?"

"None whatever," the bartender replied sadly, "and if there is, I ain't goin' to know nothin' about it. That way I ain't headin' for trouble."

"Well-trained, huh?" Morgan grinned.

The bartender shrugged his beefy shoulders and gave Morgan a more careful inspection.

"You one of Snake's boys? He hires new ones all the time and I ain't always shore who's who."

"Not yet." Morgan shook his head. "What kind of gents does Snake hire?"

"Gunslammers mostly. Them cutters of yores look well-used and I figgered yuh'd be lookin' for Snake."

"How come a town like Rifle Rock needs gunhawks?" Morgan asked casually.

The bartender's lips twisted in a wry grin and he pointed a thick, stubby finger at the cowboy.

"Now that's one of them things I don't know nothin' about. Yuh'll have to ask Snake or King."

"Might do it." Morgan shrugged. "I'll take a little pasear around town first."

"Keep yore eyes open and yore mouth shut," the bartender warned. "It's a plumb healthy rule."

MORGAN grinned and left the Winchester. He stood on the porch for a moment, looking up and down the street. The shops were open and a blacksmith's anvil clanged cheerily. Two women turned in at the general store.

Wayne Morgan left the porch and sauntered easily down the planked sidewalk. He took his time, but even so he soon came to the end of the street.

Though he looked lazy and half asleep, the mild blue eyes had missed nothing. He had photographed the entire stretch of buildings in his mind. To Morgan's idea, the town was the focal point of the valley and any trouble would be bound to center here. He wanted to know the town like a book before that happened.

He reached the white church and stopped, looking thoughtfully at the spot where the cowboy and girl had been talking.

"Jed Henry and Rita McCloud, they were," he muttered softly. "Still in love and meetin' when they can, in spite of the trouble between the spreads. I wonder what the girl'll be thinkin' about Jed, now that she believes the Diamond H salivated her father."

He shook his head and had turned around to head back when he stopped short, eyes narrowing down the road. He saw King Gardner and Snake Bannon cross the street to the Winchester, coming from the small frame hotel. At the same moment a rider came in and raised his arm in a brief signal. Morgan recognized the man as Limp Denton, segundo of the M Bar C. The man rode to the hitch-rack and dismounted, and King and Snake joined him. For a moment they stood close together, talking.

Morgan watched them, unable at the distance to catch a word that was said. But he noticed Denton's deep frown, and saw

Snake's lips form what he was sure was a curse. Gardner smiled, said something, and jerked his thumb toward the Winchester. All three men disappeared inside.

The wandering cowboy remained leaning against the wall of the saddle shop. He thoughtfully rolled a cigarette, his narrowed eyes watching the Winchester, now blank and silent.

"They was mighty thick down there," he told himself. "Now what would the segundo of a big spread be planning with a saloonkeeper and his gunslammer ramrod?"

He lit his cigarette and continued his walk. With no sign of hesitation he mounted the steps of the Winchester and pushed through the batwings. The mournful barkeep was at his station. Snake, King and Limp Denton were seated at a table in the rear. The three men watched Morgan silently as he walked to the bar and ordered.

In the mirror he could see Limp Denton plainly, and he studied the man more closely. Denton might have been handsome had it not been for the deep frown that gave his tanned face a lowering look. His brown eyes were morose and brooding, those of a man who has been sorry for himself too often.

His Stetson was on the table before him and Morgan noted the thick shock of coal black hair. Limp's mouth was well-formed, the nose straight and long. The chin at first glance looked firm, but a slight cleft somehow weakened it. Denton appeared to be of about the same height and weight as Morgan, and the cartridge belt he wore was pulled down at one hip from the weight of the heavy Colt and holster.

"Upstairs to the office," Morgan heard King Gardner say in a low voice. "He's just a wanderin' waddy, but yuh can't take chances."

Their chairs scraped back and the three men left by a door at the back that opened on to a steep stairs. Morgan could hear the booted feet ascend, thump along overhead and then stop. He finished his drink and asked where he could find the sheriff.

"Mort's at his office this time of mornin'," the barkeep answered. "Fact is, he seldom stirs his stumps out of there. Across the street and down a bit." The barkeep swished his cloth across the mahogany. "Ain't needin' a lawman, are yuh?"

"No," Morgan answered cryptically. "He's needin' me though, but he don't know it yet."

He pushed his hat forward over his eyes and left the saloon again. That conference going on upstairs interested him, but there was no chance of overhearing it. Hanging around the Winchester would only arouse deeper suspicion, and right now Morgan didn't want trouble. But he did know where Gardner's office was.

As the sheriff rolled Morgan over, the waddy raised his gun barrel toward the lawman's head (CHAPTER VIII)

Just before he reached the sheriff's office, he turned and looked back toward the Winchester. He saw the top of a tall tree towering above the building to the rear. Recalling the direction of the footsteps of the three men, Morgan was certain the tree was close to Gardner's room.

He turned and opened the sheriff's door. Mort Hatcher had been leaning back in his chair against the wall, whittling on a long stick. He looked up, pushed forward, and the chair legs thumped to the floor.

"What's in yore craw, stranger?" he asked harshly.

WAYNE MORGAN looked around the cubby-hole. The dirty floor and dusty windows, scarred desk and yellowing, neglected reward dodgers told him the caliber of lawman he faced. He had an impulse to turn around and walk out, but controlled it. Mort Hatcher was the only law in the valley and Morgan's information should go to him.

"Yesterday's shootin'," Morgan answered the question.

Hatcher looked only mildly interested. "What about it?"

"I saw the man who shot Zack McCloud," Morgan said quietly.

Hatcher didn't look up, but Morgan noticed that his knife twisted on the stick of wood, nicking his finger. Hatcher swore, snapped the blade shut. Only then did he look up and his muddy eyes were narrowed.

"Yuh shore of that?"

"Certain. I was lookin' down toward the Gunsight and saw the jasper fire. A few minutes later, I almost caught him in back of the buildin' but somebody slung lead at me and he got away."

Hatcher finally looked excited. His eyes narrowed further and he came out of his chair and leaned forward, his knuckles on the desk.

"Yuh got a good straight look at the jasper?" he demanded. "Yuh'd know him when yuh saw him again?"

"That's right," Morgan said firmly.

He described the man in detail while Hatcher listened. It seemed to Morgan that the lawman's eyes mirrored a shadow of uncertainty and fear.

"Do yuh know the man?" Morgan asked, as he finished.

"Not me," Hatcher replied swiftly, almost too swiftly. "Sounds like a drifter. Will yuh be around town for a while? I'd like to talk with yuh later. It's important."

"Mebbe a couple of hours," Morgan answered.

"I'll look for yuh," Hatcher said eagerly. "There's a gent should know about this killin' jasper yuh described."

He practically shoved Morgan out the door. As the cowboy turned away from the office he had a glimpse of Limp Denton riding out of town. Hatcher came out of the door, clamping his hat on his head. He shoved by Morgan and walked directly to the Winchester and disappeared inside.

Morgan was thoughtful as he moved away. King Gardner, he was thinking, must be the man whom Hatcher had been so anxious to see. Everything kept coming around to Gardner, Morgan decided. But where did Limp Denton fit in all this—or did he?

For half an hour Morgan loafed along the street. He dropped in at the Gunsight, and discovered the saloon to be almost a duplicate of the Winchester. But now its windows were broken and the bar had been scarred by flying slugs. The owner, a bald little wren of a man, whom Morgan heard called Gus, stood looking at the damage with a woebegone expression on his pinched face.

"Shore be glad when the trouble's over," he told Morgan, shaking his head. "A man's property ain't safe no more."

"Say, do yuh know a gent who looks like this?" Morgan asked, and he described the unknown rifleman.

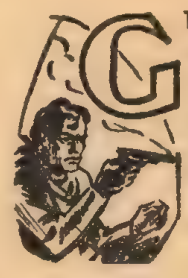
The little saloon owner listened, and slowly shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "He ain't anybody in these parts, less'n he come plumb recent."

The batwings shoved open and three men who wore their guns low on each hip came in. Their hard faces were stubbled, and their cold eyes stabbed at Morgan. He felt himself tense as, without signal, they started fanning out, the old gunman trick of catching a man in a deadly cross-fire. There would be more gunsmoke in Rifle Rock in a mere matter of minutes.

CHAPTER V

Colt Conference



GUS, behind the bar, stared hard at the three men who had come into the Gunsight and were converging on Morgan, and found it hard to swallow. He finally found his voice but it came out in a frightened squeak.

"No guns! No shootin'! There's enough damage already! For Pete's sake, don't."

No one paid any attention to him as the three gunhawks spread out and faced his customer at the bar. Gus gulped hard again and disappeared below the bar as if someone had jerked his feet out from under him. Morgan who had swung around easily and clear of the bar, waited, his hands hanging loose at his sides.

"Before yuh start smokin'," he suggested quietly, "mebbe yuh could tell me why yuh want to."

"We don't like yore clothes," the biggest of the gun slammers answered, and smiled coldly. "Reckon that's answer enough."

"It's my eyes that bother yuh, I reckon," Morgan said coolly. "They see too much."

"That's good, too," the man said surlily. "Mebbe that suits us."

His hand slapped down to his holster. The other two crouched and faded to either side, taloned fingers diving for their guns. Morgan's hands blurred down and up, the heavy sixes gleaming. He had sunk into a steady crouch, eyes cold and hard, lips a thin straight gash above a granite chin.

He slammed a hasty shot to the left, causing the gunman there to duck instinctively and slow his draw. Morgan's right hand squeezed tight around the Colt and the weapon bucked and flamed in his fist. A slug pulled at his shirt sleeve and gunsmoke billowed high, but in the same instant a big gunman slammed backward, Colt still unfired, a hole in his forehead.

Morgan whirled, guns lining down on the man to his right. The gunman over to the left threw a hasty shot that plowed the length of the scarred bar and finally buried itself deep in the wood. Morgan and the other gunman matched sixes, both guns roaring as one. The gunhawk doubled over, hinging at the waist, a look of stunned surprise in his staring eyes.

Morgan shifted fast, and a slug cut the air where he had stood a breath of time before. His Colt blasted again. The last of the gunmen left alive whirled half around, spun by the slap of the heavy slug in his shoulder. His Colt clattered to the floor. He seemed to do a jig step, then lost his balance and fell heavily.

Morgan jumped forward, kicked the dropped Colt under a far table. His face was bleak and hard as he holstered his sixes and jerked the wounded man to his feet. The killer whimpered with pain and blood started staining his shoulder. Morgan whirled him half around and pointed to the two silent forms on the floor.

"You could be with them jaspers right now," he snapped. "Yuh might still be if yuh don't talk. Who sent yuh to gun me?"

"I don't know." the man gasped.

"Yuh lie!" Morgan gritted.

Fear mingled with the pain in the man's beady eyes and his loose lips trembled.

"That's straight," he declared, stammering in his haste to convince. "Joe over there said we had a job. Me'n Bates came with him."

"All right," Morgan snapped. "Who gave Joe his orders?"

The wounded man hesitated, licked his lips. He clutched at his injured shoulder and looked wildly around as though seeking a means of escape. He found none, but Wayne Morgan waited there, grim and merciless. The man shrugged.

"I reckon yuh'll know anyhow," he growled. "Joe took orders from—"

The batwings banged back and Mort Hatcher came storming in. Gus ducked back under his barricade with a despairing howl. Hatcher pulled up short, muddy eyes dropping to the two silent figures on the floor. He whirled around, glaring at Morgan. His hands slapped down, but his fingers only touched the gun butt. Morgan apparently had not moved, yet Hatcher found himself looking into the black muzzles of twin Colts. He froze, hand still outspread over his gun. His eyes lifted and his thick lips were slightly parted.

"Leave yore iron alone!" Wayne Morgan snapped at him. "I didn't start this ruckus. The gent behind the bar will tell yuh that."

Hatcher didn't move a muscle. His voice sounded thick and choked.

"Yuh got just fifteen minutes to get out of town, Morgan, and two hours to get out of the valley. Yuh can't hold them cutters on me all day, and there's too many hombres for yuh to buck in Rifle Rock."

"Like these gunslammers?" Morgan asked in clipped tones.

"I've kept Rifle Rock peaceful so far," Hatcher went on as though he hadn't heard, "except for the fracas yesterday—and this. I don't aim to let any gunhawk run loose. Get out of Rifle Valley before I come for yuh, Morgan!"

"How about that talk we was to have?" Morgan demanded.

"It's a pack of lies yuh told me!" Hatcher said heatedly, though he was staring in fascination as Morgan's hands whitened around his guns. "There ain't no such man!"

"Shuck yore gun, Hatcher," Morgan snapped. "I'm leaving Rifle Rock for the time being. But I'll be back."

"Yuh'll be dead if yuh do!" the lawman challenged angrily.

"Mebbe. But I don't aim to be dead right away. Unbuckle that belt!"

HATCHER slowly moved, carefully loosening the buckle and letting the belt fall to his feet. The wounded gunhawk leaned against the bar, eyes glazed with pain, still clutching his shoulder. Morgan shot him a swift, harsh glance.

"Now," he announced, "get on with what it was yuh was goin' to tell me, yuh lobo! Who was it sent you and these other two after me?"

The gunhawk stumbled as he moved. He opened his mouth to speak, shooting a frightened glance at the sheriff, but if he had intended to say anything, it never was said. For even with his single movement he reeled, then tumbled to the bar-room floor like a sack of potatoes, completely out.

Wayne Morgan swore, but there was noth-

ing he could do about it—right then. He glowered at the sheriff.

"You heard me," he snapped, "and I'm not through with this business. I'm comin' back some time, like I said, and then I aim to find out who sent these three skunks after my hide. No time now. Get over against that far wall, Hatcher!"

Hatcher cursed, but lumbered over to the wall, with one glance at the wounded man and the two dead men on the floor. Morgan kicked the lawman's gun-belt to the far end of the bar. He edged to the batwings, paused there, cold blue eyes blazing at the lawman.

"Yore kind of law don't last long," he flung at Hatcher. "I'll see yuh again."

He turned and disappeared through the batwings. He hit the porch, cut sharply away from the steps. His boots thudded along the planks and he jumped off the high end to the ground, to run swiftly the length of the building to the rear and then along the line of stores back to where his horse was hitched.

He came out on the street just a few feet from the roan he rode when in his rôle of Wayne Morgan. As he ran to his mount he heard Hatcher's hoarse shout but paid no attention. A gun blasted, but the slug whined high and wide. Morgan hit leather and neck-reined the roan around. Another shot came closer. Curious heads popped out of windows and doors. But Morgan touched with spurs and rode out of Rifle Rock in a cloud of dust.

There were no more shots, but Wayne Morgan rode hard. He expected more trouble, and time and again he looked back. But when he left the road, there was as yet no pursuit. He headed the horse toward the canyon hide-out, working toward it in a huge circle that would confuse any who tried to follow him.

Late in the afternoon he reached the hideout. Blue Hawk was not there and the pinto was gone. Morgan dismounted and turned the tired roan loose. He sank down on the ground and rolled a cigarette. The stallion whinnied greetings and Morgan smiled slightly. Midnight would have a chance to show his speed again tonight, for this night the Masked Rider would make a sortie into Rifle Rock. He wanted a good look at King Gardner's office. The man needed explaining—a lot of it.

Morgan realized now that his having seen the man who shot McCloud was a direct and positive threat to somebody's plans. So much so that the three gunhawks had been sent to shut him up. Hatcher had been conveniently busy elsewhere when the killers had struck, but he had been fast enough after the gun fight was over. Morgan stretched out on the thick grass, lazily wondering how long he would have remained alive in Hatcher's jail, if he had allowed himself to be taken there.

Hatcher was in on the deal, whatever it was—no doubt of that. Morgan shook his head. He was getting too many suspects, and none of them fitted anywhere. If Buck Henry was right, the man behind the trouble should be a rancher, which would eliminate Gardner, Hatcher, and the gunhawk, Snake Bannon. It might eliminate Limp Denton, but Morgan was not ready as yet to take the segundo from his list of suspects. Denton knew cows and ranching, but it was hard to explain how he could profit from the trouble.

Wayne Morgan sighed, and closed his eyes. He wanted rest before night had fallen.

Just at dusk Blue Hawk came in to the hide-out. Morgan had started a small fire and had nearly finished preparing the meal for the two of them. Blue Hawk unsaddled the pinto and came silently to the fire. Morgan looked up, a lazy smile on his lips.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Nothing, Senor, but I have not covered all the Valley. There is rich graze but no minerals."

"Well, that leaves us with a land grab to think of as bein' behind this trouble. But the jasper who is responsible for it is keepin' hisself well hid all right."

"You go to M Bar C?" Blue Hawk asked.

"After I take a look in Rifle Rock tonight, amigo. That King Gardner, the saloon man I told yuh about, is in this deal somewhere. If graze and cattle are the reason for it, it looks like Limp Denton would take some trailin'. He's close to Gardner, too."

Morgan told Blue Hawk of the events of the day as the two men ate. Blue Hawk listened, his dark face impassive.

"Sheriff is crooked," the Yaqui grunted, when Morgan finished. "He tell someone what you know and that person send gunmen to kill you."

"Shore," said Morgan. "But who yuh figger Hatcher talked to?"

"King Gardner," Blue Hawk said coolly.

"I wound up with that brand, too," Morgan admitted. "Mebbe Gardner's helpin' Denton. But Limp is only a segundo. Why should he stir up trouble and have his boss drygulched? It just ain't addin' up, Blue Hawk."

"It will, Senor," the Indian assured. "If we keep at it."

"That's what I intend to do, and that's why I want a look at Gardner's office." He got up and stretched. "Well, I reckon it's about time for the Masked Rider to appear. Gettin' late."

BLUE HAWK also arose, and went for the stallion, Midnight. Wayne Morgan busied himself at a bed-roll. When finally he straightened up and turned, the wandering waddy had disappeared. In his place stood the Masked Rider, his black cloak falling

around his shoulders. He seemed taller, straighter than the cowboy.

Blue Hawk came in riding the gray and leading the stallion. Without a word the Masked Rider vaulted to Midnight's saddle and the two friends rode out of the canyon.

Rifle Rock was again sheltered by darkness when the Masked Rider drew rein at one end of the town. His blue eyes, chill now, gazed steadily through the domino mask at the few lights along the street. There was little doing in Rifle Rock, since both the M Bar C and the Diamond H were staying close to their own spreads.

The Masked Rider spoke a word and the two men skirted the town. Like part of the night itself, they drifted up the back of the Winchester. The saloon was quiet, almost too quiet. Blue Hawk slid out of the saddle and disappeared in the darkness. His companion waited, silent and alert.

In a few moments the Indian drifted back out of the darkness.

"Back door, Senor," he whispered. "Gunhawks in the saloon. Upstairs dark."

The Masked Rider swung out of leather and passed the reins to Blue Hawk. The Yaqui watched the dark figure disappear in the night. He waited, black eyes fixed in a glittering stare on the shadowy bulk of the saloon.

When the Masked Rider reached the rear door, the same one he had used when he had tried to capture McCloud's ambusher, he carefully turned the knob and slowly let the door swing inward. Down the short hall, through the crack of the other door, he could see the light from the bar-room. Even as he looked, the knob was rattled.

Instantly the Masked Rider stepped back, pulled the door closed, but kept his hand on the knob. He crouched outside, ear pressed to the panel. He heard heavy boots and talking.

"Hatcher," a coarse voice was saying, "yuh shouldn't have let that waddy get away. How yuh know he won't go to Henry?"

"Shut up, Snake, until we get to the office," Gardner's voice snapped. "Yuh want the whole town to listen in?"

Bannon growled something unintelligible. Then boots ascended the stairs.

Just above the Masked Rider a lamp glowed. He raised his eyes and his lips tightened with decision. Again he eased open the door, and this time stepped inside the dark hall. Carefully he pushed the door shut behind him, making sure the catch did not click. He did not want to lose a precious instant turning the knob in case he had to leave in a hurry.

He edged forward, muscles tense, keen ears alert for any sound from above or below. The bar-room door was closed again and there was only faint murmurs from beyond it.

The Masked Rider found the dark stairs leading upward. Pressing against one wall, he climbed slowly. When he reached the top he stood in a long hall that ran the length of the building, and he saw a faint line of light under a far door, to the rear.

He lifted his Colts from their holsters and cat-footed toward the light. As he edged closer he could hear the murmur of voices inside the room grow in volume. Finally he stood at the door, crouched and tensed. Now he could distinctly hear each word spoken, and recognized Hatcher's growling voice.

"Don't blame me, Snake. Them gunhawks of yores had already upset the coffee pot. I only tried to finish what they'd started."

"There ain't no need to argue about Morgan," Gardner's voice cut in, smooth and pacifying. "He's done left town and has probably rode plumb out of the valley. That's what we want anyhow, and it saves us salivatin' him."

"I ain't so shore he's gone," Snake grumbled. "I'd feel safer with him in Boothill. He saw too much."

"Shore he did," Gardner agreed, "but so long as he's not here to talk, we're safe. Bannon, you and Hatcher are plumb nervous."

"Who wouldn't be," Hatcher demanded,

[Turn page]

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"with all the dinero in sight? King, yuh shore yuh can swing this deal?"

"Why not? The stuff is here, right in these hills. I know the road has to come right through Rifle Valley. We got a jealous hombre workin' with us and we got him plumb fooled. What yuh think the Diamond H and M Bar C will be worth once they've done chewed one another to pieces?"

"I'll probably knock 'em down to the highest bidder," Hatcher said, with a laugh.

"That'll be me," Gardner assured. "Of course, I figger on gettin' the M Bar C just as cheap if Limp—"

A door suddenly opened below and the Masked Rider jerked back. He half turned, looking toward the stairs. At least two men were below. The Masked Rider's eyes cut the length of the hall. If the men came up, he was trapped. At that moment he heard the thud of boots on the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

Gunhand

THE Masked Rider moved with the speed of a mountain cat. With three long strides he reached the head of the stairs and flattened himself against the wall just around the corner as the men he had heard in time ascended. The twin Colts in the Masked Rider's hands settled more firmly.

Abruptly the door down the hall opened and light fanned out into the hall. Snake Bannon stood framed, his uncombed hair looking even redder in the glow of the lamp behind him. The Masked Rider had a brief glimpse of Gardner seated at a desk, of Hatcher standing glumly beside it. Then Bannon saw the dark figure in the hallway. His jaw dropped in sheer surprise. The men on the stairway were almost at the top when Snake's constricted throat regained its power.

"The Masked Rider!" he yelled. His hand dropped down to his gun.

Instantly the Masked Rider exploded into action. He threw a slug at Bannon that smacked into the door casing beside the man's red head. Bannon jumped back, tugging desperately at his Colt. The men on the stairway halted, confused.

The Masked Rider swung around the corner and jumped down. The gunhawks had only a glimpse of a hurtling, black-cloaked figure. They had no time to move before the Masked Rider was upon them. His gunbarrel rapped smartly against one man's head and his shoulder hit the second hard in the chest.

Both men fell backward down the stairs, a spinning confusion of arms and legs. The Masked Rider leaped after them, had reached the bottom of the stairs as Bannon and Hatcher appeared at the top. He crouched, whirled, and sent two shots blasting upward. Bannon faded again but Hatcher sent one wild slug singing downward before he jumped for cover.

As the Masked Rider hurtled the two gunhawks and sped for the rear door he heard Gardner's alarmed shout and Hatcher's wild cursing. From the bar-room came the crash of chairs as Bannon's gunslammers jumped to their feet. They were hurling themselves at the door when the Masked Rider sent lead smashing through the thin panel. A man howled in agony.

The Masked Rider sped to the rear door, jerked it open. He could hear the pound of heavy boots on the stairs as Snake, Hatcher, and Gardner rushed down, but the Masked Rider had disappeared into the night, running swiftly.

Blue Hawk loomed out of the darkness, leading Midnight. The Masked Rider vaulted to saddle. Instantly the powerful stallion plunged away into the night.

The saloon erupted men, gunslammers with heavy Colts in their fists. They heard only the fading pound of hoofs and then the night was silent. They milled uncertainly until King Gardner came out, with Hatcher and Snake pressing close behind him. The saloonkeeper realized the quarry had fled and he gave flat orders for the men to return to the saloon. He turned and looked hard at Snake Bannon.

"Now we've got some real trouble on our hands," he said tightly. "That Masked Rider is a gent who'll take some killin'."

"I don't like it, King," Hatcher said slowly.

King whirled on him, face working angrily. "Gettin' yeller?" he demanded. "Well, yuh're in this deal and yuh'll stay. There's too much dinero in this for any of us to give up."

"Mebbe I don't want the money as bad as I figgered," Hatcher said hesitantly, and Gardner smiled slowly.

"Mebbe yuh'll like Boothill instead, huh?" he queried. "Well, I reckon that could be done, too. Think it over."

As the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk streaked away from Rifle Rock, at first they had been expecting pursuit. But it soon became evident that the men on whom they had been spying had been caught too much by surprise to follow the fleeing men. Finally the Masked Rider pulled up Midnight. Blue Hawk also reined in and waited, impassive and silent, for the man in black to speak.

"Gardner's back of this puzzle," the Masked Rider said after a moment, "and he's interested in gettin' both the ranches. He's usin' Limp Denton in some way. Blue Hawk, there has to be a mineral deposit of some kind around here. Gardner spoke of what

he's after as bein' 'in these hills.' Keep lookin' for sign."

"I will, Senor."

"Somethin' else—I think there's to be a road built through here."

"Road, Senor?" Blue Hawk said in quick surprise. "But there is already one."

"Shore, but Gardner mentioned another one to come. This trouble in Rifle Valley is beginnin' to make a little sense, but I still want to know what part Denton's playin'. I think I'll be at the M Bar C at dawn."

"I'll look for you there, Senor, if I have need of it."

"Right, Blue Hawk. Yuh might watch Rifle Rock for a while in the mornin' to see if them renegades try to pick up our cold trail. If they don't, then head for the hills."

BLUE HAWK dismounted with the Masked Rider. From the bed-roll behind the cantle of the stallion, the Masked Rider pulled a battered Stetson. The mask, cloak and black hat disappeared and Wayne Morgan took the gray mount Blue Hawk had been riding. He swung into saddle, waved his hand in brief goodby and rode away in the darkness.

Circling Rifle Rock, he struck the road beyond the town and settled to the long ride to the M Bar C. Far after midnight he came to the trail that branched off to the ranch. Morgan rode along it for a while, then pulled off. After a glance at the stars he rolled up in a blanket and took a few hours' sleep and rest.

The first rays of the sun awakened him. He stretched the cramps out of his muscles, rolled his blanket and again swung into saddle. Before long he topped a small hummock and saw the sprawling buildings of the M Bar C just ahead.

Morgan deliberately gambled when he rode into the yard. He gambled that Limp Denton as yet did not know about him, and that none of the men he had tangled with in Rifle Rock would visit the ranch during the short time he planned to stay. Give him a day and a night here, and Morgan was confident that he would be able to know at least a little more about Limp Denton.

The ranchhouse was silent and no one was in the yard when Wayne Morgan rode up. He heard sounds of life in the bunkhouse and the cook's cheery whistle from the cookshack. There was a small two-room building to one side of the ranchhouse that obviously was the quarters of the segundo.

Wayne Morgan dismounted, turned, and hitched up his gun-belt. He started toward the small shack but a sudden challenge from the bunkhouse swung him around. A young cowboy stood in the doorway, a Colt in his fist.

"Where yuh aimin' to ramble, stranger?" he demanded.

Morgan's lazy smile softened his lips. He jerked a thumb toward the cottage.

"I figgered to talk to the boss. Yuh can put that six up, amigo. I'm peaceful."

"You might be, but we ain't," the cowboy snapped. "We got a bad wounded man here now. Just elevate yore hands and I'll call Limp out."

The cowboy came forward as Morgan raised his arms. The fellow was about twenty-five, with a lean, tanned clean look to his angular face and jaw. His eyes were a clear brown, open and direct, though now his lips were set and he obviously regarded Morgan with suspicion. He kept his Colt steady, circled Morgan and knocked on the door of the shack.

"Limp!" he called. "Hey, Limp! There's a strange rider out here wants to see yuh."

In a moment the door was jerked open and Limp Denton stepped out. His dark, morose eyes cut to Wayne Morgan and glittered in instant suspicion. His hand dropped to the gun he wore and he advanced, his left shoulder dropping as he limped. His weighing glance dropped to the crossed gun-belts, then lifted again.

"What's in yore craw?" he demanded. "We don't take kindly to strangers."

"Now what's wrong with this valley?" Morgan drawled, in an aggrieved tone. "I ain't aimin' to harm anybody. Me, I'm just tryin' to find a job and drifted down this way."

"Pilgrim, huh?" Limp spoke sharply. His eyes narrowed. "Where from?"

"I started in Montana but I've covered a heap of miles since then. Say, could I drop these arms? They're gettin' plumb heavy stickin' up there in the sky."

Limp hesitated a moment, then briefly nodded. He spoke to the young cowboy.

"Yuh can put up that cutter, Bart. I reckon I can handle the jasper if he gets proddy."

Morgan lowered his arms, rubbed them. Bart hefted his six in his hand a moment as if undecided whether to follow orders or not. Then he gave a slight shrug and dropped the Colt in leather. Slowly he returned to the bunkhouse door, said something to the men inside and then leaned against the frame, a silent warning to the stranger.

"This is a bad country for work, pilgrim," Limp said.

"I'm shore findin' that out," Morgan said wryly. "I make a good cowhand, mister, and I hope yuh could use one."

Limp scratched his jaw and his glance dropped again to the crossed gun-belts.

"We ain't exactly looking for cowhands," he said carefully, "but yuh look like yuh could do somethin' else."

"Huh? Oh, these guns. I've handled 'em in my time." Morgan grinned.

"Good with 'em?"

"Fair to middlin'. Ain't been plugged yet and I've been places where no man could hardly say that."

"Come on back of the barn," Limp ordered with sudden decision.

He turned on his heel and Morgan followed him. Morgan noted that, despite Limp's bad hip, he could move fast. They circled the barn and came out in a narrow pasture for stock to be held close to the ranch. Limp pointed to a row of glass jars stuck over a line of pickets some distance away.

"Let me see what yuh can do."

MORGAN looked puzzled at the jars and turned to Limp.

"Yuh mean yuh want me to bust them good jars?"

"Rita can replace 'em," Limp snapped. "Start smokin'."

"Like this?" Morgan asked.

His hands blurred down and he whirled. Almost like a rolling thunder, his guns roared and chattered. Along the fence posts jars crashed in a swift line, ten of them. Wayne Morgan, blue eyes sparkling, ejected the empties from one gun and looked up at Limp.

"That what yuh mean?"

Limp's jaw was hanging open. He swallowed deeply and chuckled ruefully.

"And I told Bart Malone I could handle yuh if yuh got proddy! Yuh've got yoreself a job, pilgrim, and I pay fightin' wages. Let's get to the house and I'll tell Miss Rita."

"Yuh got a woman boss?" Morgan asked abruptly. He frowned as though he didn't like the idea.

"Our regular boss is down with lead poisonin'," Denton explained, watching Morgan reload. "His daughter's in charge till he's back on his feet. But to be honest, I give the orders."

"Oh, I see." Morgan looked wise. "You and the lady sort of—understand one another."

"That's it, though we don't say nothing about it. Let's get to the house."

They rounded the barn and Morgan saw a girl at the door of the ranchhouse. She was tall, well-formed, graceful. As they came closer Morgan saw that her dark eyes were clouded with fear. One hand was at the white column of her throat, the other clenched at her side. Her face was a tanned oval, framed by dark waving hair. The gingham dress she wore accented simply the lovely lines of her figure. Red lips were slightly parted, revealing white, even teeth.

"What was the shooting, Limp?" she asked.

"The gent here was showin' what he could do. I'm hirin' him, Rita."

"The name's Morgan," the blue-eyed waddy put in and swept off his battered hat. "Wayne Morgan."

The girl paid no attention to him. Her lips snapped shut and her jaw formed a hard angle. Her eyes sparkled angrily and she took a half step forward.

"Gun hawk!" she exclaimed. "I won't have it, Limp. We have never hired fighting men, killers, and we won't now."

Limp scowled. "Yuh never will learn, will yuh, Rita? What about yore pa in there now?"

"The law will take care of whoever shot father," she snapped in reply. "We will not be a gunhawk ranch."

"Yuh'd let the Henrys just ride in and do what they please," Limp sneered. His features twisted in rage. "We can be robbed blind, rustled white, shot down whenever we go to town. It's all right with you because of that Jed Henry."

"Limp!" Rita exclaimed and her face became pale.

Limp didn't seem to hear her, or remember that Morgan stood close by.

"Yuh're plumb loco over that jasper. Well, he shot yore pa, or ordered his shootin'—yuh can depend on that. He ain't no different than any other killer, and if I get him in my gunsights—"

The girl's hand cracked against his cheek. Limp flinched and stepped back. His face was pale, showing the red marks of the girl's hand. Rita's shoulders slumped and she turned, running back to the house. She stopped at the door and Morgan could see her square her shoulders. She turned, face drawn.

"I'm sorry for that, Limp." She made a slight gesture of defeat with her arms. "Do what you please. I'm tired of fighting."

She disappeared within the house. Limp stood stock-still, his face a study in fury and jealousy. Morgan shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. Limp came to with a start, flushing slightly.

"Yuh'll find a place in the bunkhouse," he growled to Morgan. "See Bart Malone. Cooky has breakfast about ready. Yuh're on—at gun wages."

He walked rapidly toward his little house and disappeared. The door slammed behind him.

CHAPTER VII

Spy!

WAYNE MORGAN looked back toward the ranchhouse and his brows arched questioningly. From what Rita McCloud had said about gunslammers, Morgan was ready to cross the M Bar C off his lists of suspects. Buck Henry had been entirely wrong. When a ranch started rustling, it started hiring gun-

hawks. One was absolutely essential to the other.

But Limp Denton was another question, Morgan thought, as he moved slowly toward the corral with his horse. That flare-up between Limp and Rita McCloud had been enlightening. Limp Denton was jealous of, and hated, young Jed Henry so greatly that he was determined to line the man in his gunsights. Morgan scratched his head and sighed.

"Reason enough there," he mused, "if I could see how it fits in with the rest. But what has jealousy got to do with minerals and a road? And what minerals and what road? And where?"

He chuckled derisively at himself and turned the horse into the corral.

Bart Malone was waiting for him at the bunkhouse door, and the young cowboy was smiling. He flushed a little as Morgan looked at him.

"Plumb sorry I threw down on yuh," he blurted. "But we've had trouble."

"I reckoned as much." Morgan smiled back. "No hard feelin's. How about a place to bunk? And I'm plumb famished."

Malone eagerly showed him a bunk, then led him to the cookshack where he introduced Morgan to the crew. Not a one of them was a professional gunslinger, Morgan noted. All of them cowboys, friendly enough, but intensely loyal to the McClouds and the M Bar C.

After the meal, they went out in the yard and started rolling quirlies. None of them went to the corrals to get their horses and start the work on the range.

"Don't nobody earn his pay here?" Morgan asked Bart Malone.

"We're stickin' close to home right now," Malone answered, a shadow coming over his face. "There was trouble a few days ago and our boss was bad shot. Limp sort of figgered mebbe them back-shootin' snakes would raid the ranch, so we're waitin' to see what happens."

Morgan seemed to be thinking the news over and his face showed surprise.

"Who yuh figger on fightin'?" he finally asked.

"Diamond H, looks like," Malone replied. He shook his head. "I can't figger it myself. Buck Henry and his son, Jed, shore looked like fine people to me. But they've done started rustlin' and shootin' at us. It don't add up."

Limp Denton came out of his quarters and hurried to the corral. He roped and saddled a horse, then came riding up to the bunkhouse. Bart Malone stepped out to meet him.

"I'm ridin' to Rifle Rock," Limp snapped. "Might be there all day. See the boys stay close, Malone, and keep an eye on Miss Rita and Zack. I'll be back tonight."

He rode off at a fast canter, and Morgan made himself a promise to be gone by night. Gardner or someone in Rifle Rock would be sure to mention Wayne Morgan to Limp. The segundo would come riding back looking for trouble, and for the moment Morgan didn't want to clash with him.

"I been lookin' for an hombre down this way," Morgan said as Malone again sank down beside him. "He most usually has a red stubble on his face and the face would shore scare little kids on a dark night. Got himself a scar that pulls his lips down on one side. The scar runs clean on down under the jaw. Ever see or hear tell of him?"

"He shore don't sound like anyone I know." Malone shook his head. "I don't remember even seein' a gent like that. Of course, I'm pretty close to the ranch all the time, though, and don't see everybody that comes to the Valley."

Morgan had to be content with that.

The time passed slowly and the new hand used it to good advantage. He learned that Zack McCloud was seriously wounded but the doctor gave him a fair chance of pulling through. The M Bar C hands as a whole were certain that Buck Henry and the Diamond H were behind their trouble. It would only take a word to send them against the Henrys with gunsmoke. Limp Denton was more than ready to say the word. Only Rita McCloud held them back.

Later in the afternoon, Morgan decided it was time he left the M Bar C. Denton would be back from Rifle Rock, and trouble for Wayne Morgan would be riding with him. For over an hour Morgan had not been able to leave the group without arousing suspicion. He hid his growing tension, however, and at last started edging toward the door. He wanted to slip outside, saddle and be off before any of the men realized his intention.

He had nearly reached the bunkhouse door. The men were grouped around Malone, their interest centered on the young cowboy. Morgan had touched the knob when he heard men ride into the yard, but so had the rest. Malone looked out the window.

"It's Limp," he announced, "and he's got the sheriff and Gardner with him. I wonder what's happened now?"

MORGAN knew what had happened. He was trapped between the men in the yard and the M Bar C hands inside. He thought for a moment of blasting his way to freedom, but pushed the thought aside. It might mean the death for some of these men here, and Morgan didn't want that to his credit.

Bart Malone and the men crowded to the door and outside. Wayne Morgan went with them, keeping to the back of the group and edging his way along the bunkhouse wall.

Denton, Hatcher and King Gardner swung out of saddles and came toward the bunk-

house. Hatcher lifted his Colt from leather, and Limp's face was dark with suppressed fury.

"Where's that hombre I hired this mornin'?" he barked.

Malone turned around. Morgan stopped in his tracks. Hatcher saw him then and the bloodless lips curled in triumph as he lifted his Colt, lining it down on Morgan's chest.

"Just stand hitched, sidewinder. Yuh ain't goin' nowheres but to jail."

"What for?" Morgan demanded quietly.

"Yuh're a blasted Diamond H spy!" Limp Denton broke in, fairly spitting his words. "The Henrys sent yuh here!"

Hatcher's gesture stopped Limp. The lawman spoke slowly and distinctly.

"Yuh're under arrest for the attempted murder of Zack McCloud. Yuh hired on here to get a chance to finish the job. If Zack dies, yuh'll stretch rope, killer!"

Morgan slowly raised his hands above his head. His mild blue eyes had become as cold and hard as steel. The M Bar C men stared at him, then the red flush of anger slowly worked up into their faces. Bart Malone's hand dropped to his holster.

"Yuh sneaking killer!" he rasped. "I ought to blast yuh down where yuh stand!"

"I didn't shoot Zack, and Hatcher knows it," Morgan protested. "He has another reason for arrestin' me."

"Shut up!" Hatcher gritted. He came close and pulled the sixes from Morgan's holster. "Bart, don't start no trouble. This man is my prisoner."

Rita McCloud came out of the house and up to the group. Limp walked to meet her and in a few words explained the arrest. Rita listened, her face becoming pale and set. She looked at Morgan, and her glance held a world of loathing and contempt. She looked away and at Limp.

"The law did find Father's drygulcher, Limp," she said. "Just as I said it would. You were terribly wrong in blaming the Henrys."

"He's a Diamond H spy," Limp rapped out, jerking a thumb at Morgan.

"Is that true?" Rita asked, turning to the accused waddy.

"No, it ain't," Morgan said firmly. "And I never shot yore father."

"Lying in his teeth!" Hatcher growled. "Malone, rope and saddle his hoss. We're wastin' time."

In a short while, Morgan rode out of the M Bar C yard, holsters empty. To either side rode Mort Hatcher and King Gardner. Two M Bar C hands that Limp had loaned in case of trouble came just behind the three. They headed for Rifle Rock and the jail.

Hatcher could not keep the pleased smirk from his face. King Gardner showed no emotion, but now and then his green eyes cut toward Morgan and there was a deep sparkle of triumph in them. Morgan said nothing.

He held an ace up his sleeve, unknown to these two plotters. Blue Hawk would come to the M Bar C to report. When he found Morgan gone, he would instantly know that something was wrong. The silent Yaqui could be depended upon.

When they reached Rifle Rock, the small party headed immediately for the jail. Morgan was shoved into a small cell and the barred door locked. He watched the party disappear up the corridor toward Hatcher's office, heard the boom of voices, then all but the sheriff left. In a few moments Hatcher came back into the corridor. He grinned at Morgan.

"How yuh like our jail?"

"I've seen better," Morgan answered dryly. He sank down on the hard bunk. "Mind tellin' me why I'm arrested?"

"Not at all, amigo," Hatcher boomed, and chuckled. "Yuh tried to salivate Zack McCloud."

"You know that ain't so," Morgan said, without emotion. "I've been arrested because I saw too much for somebody's comfort. I described the jasper who shot McCloud."

"Now that's true, ain't it?" Hatcher grinned. "But do yuh know that a good citizen of Rifle Rock saw the shootin'? His tally of the gent's looks, size and weight just fits you right down to the ground. I reckon we believe the citizen."

"Sheriff"—Morgan leaned easily back against the wall—"I got an idea I won't never come to trial. I don't think yore boss can let that happen."

"Now what gave yuh that idea?" Hatcher chuckled. "Make yoreself right comfortable. "Yuh ain't goin' to see anybody, and we'll keep yuh right here till Zack McCloud dies. After that, we'll see what happens."

"So McCloud is to die," Morgan said, and smiled bleakly.

HATCHER frowned, then the frown disappeared as his leering grin returned. He chuckled deeply again, waved his hand, and clumped down the corridor. His office door slammed with dread finality and Wayne Morgan was left alone.

He settled himself for patient waiting. He was certain now from what Hatcher had said that there would be little danger from the outside, for once. Of course, Morgan knew that the hulking lawman took orders from someone else. Still, Blue Hawk would be approaching the M Bar C even now.

Morgan lay full length on the bunk, hands under his head, looking up at the dirty ceiling. He hoped that Blue Hawk's wanderings would confirm his suspicion that metallic wealth of some kind was involved. Morgan's own short visit to the M Bar C had thrown considerable light on the problem.

Limp Denton was eaten up with jealousy of Rita McCloud. He had evidently come to some agreement with King Gardner to strike back at the Henrys. But so far the M Bar C seemed the hardest hit.

Morgan felt certain that Gardner was playing for big stakes of some kind. He had gathered a band of gunhawks around him, and their services cost money and plenty of it. As yet, though, they seemed to have done little to earn their pay. Gardner must be holding them for some future need, and that worried Morgan.

On the whole, the general line of the trouble in Rifle Valley was fairly clear. The two ranches had been skillfully played against one another, creating gunsmoke trouble. The third party, either Limp or Gardner, or both, planned to step in when M Bar C and Diamond H were too weak from fighting to protect themselves.

As yet the motive was not clear, and it looked as if Limp and Gardner were working toward different aims. Proof against either right now, though, was impossible, and Morgan realized that he must have definite proof to expose the two plotters to McCloud and Buck Henry.

At dusk, Hatcher lit a weak lamp in the corridor. He grinned in at Morgan through the bars and disappeared again. In about half an hour he returned with a tray of food. He unlocked the door and held his Colt, hammer dogged back, in one hand while he gingerly placed the tray inside the door. He turned the key in the lock again with obvious relief.

"Yuh couldn't have better service was yuh in a hotel," he jeered.

"I'll take the hotel." Morgan grinned back at him.

"Yuh'll take the jail, hombre," Hatcher promised coldly. "Yuh ain't goin' nowhere else for a long time."

Once more he clumped off down the hall. Morgan ate, then stretched out on the bunk again. He could hear the sounds of Rifle Rock through the open, barred window. It was muted, almost furtive, as if the town feared to live its natural life. Morgan sensed it and wondered how powerful a hold Gardner had on the town.

Time passed slowly. Morgan drifted off in a light sleep, awakened. He arose from the bunk and stepped to the window, peering out between the bars. He saw the dark bulk of a low building across the yard in which the jail sat. There was no light back here, from street or window. He heard boots thump along the planked sidewalk out in front, then fade away.

"Senor?" a low voice whispered close at hand.

"Blue Hawk!" Morgan called softly in reply. "I'm at the window."

A shadow stirred, moved, then Blue Hawk's ghostly form appeared out of the darkness. He came up to the window and thrust something through the bars. Morgan's eager hand touched the cold metal of a Colt. His fingers closed tightly around it.

"Midnight is here, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered, "at the end of the yard. I will wait."

"Good, amigo. I don't reckon it will take long to get out of here."

The Yaqui drifted off into the darkness again and Morgan turned from the window. He stood a moment, thinking, gun hanging loose in his hand. He caught a gleam of light from the food tray Hatcher had left. The lamp in the corridor gave a feeble yellow light, uncertain and tricky through the bars. Morgan grinned.

He picked up the tray, dishes and all, and lifted it high above his head. He yelled with all the force of his lungs and crashed the tray to the floor. It made a terrific racket. Immediately he threw himself to the ground, face down, gun hand hidden under his body.

The office door burst open and Hatcher thundered down the corridor. Through slitted eyes, Morgan saw the lawman hold his sixgun ready in his hand. Morgan let every muscle go limp. Hatcher came to the door and peered through the bars.

Morgan held his breath. Suddenly the lawman cursed. The light grew stronger as Hatcher picked up the lamp from its bracket and held it high. Morgan heard the man's keys rattle and then the barred door swung open. Hatcher stepped cautiously inside, gun held tightly in his fist, lined on the sprawled figure on the floor.

CHAPTER VIII

Jail Break

FOR a moment Hatcher stood still, suspicious eyes boring into the flaccid body on the cell floor. Then his eyes cut around to the wreckage of the tray, the broken china, and finally lifted to the barred window. He set the lamp down and carefully approached the prisoner. He touched Morgan's back with his fingertips and still Morgan didn't move. Hatcher swore.

"Snake ain't done it already," he breathed.

In sudden decision, he holstered his gun. He grasped Morgan's slack shoulders and rolled him over. And in that instant, like a striking snake, Morgan's hand came up. His gun barrel rapped heavily down on Hatcher's head and the lawman collapsed without a sound. Morgan had to work himself out from under the heavy body.

He worked fast. Pulling Hatcher over to the bunk he tugged the lawman onto it, then

picked up the man's gun and stuck it in his waistband. Then he hurried out of the cell and into the office.

A quick search of the big drawer of the battered desk revealed the handcuffs. With them, Morgan returned to the cell. He snapped one of the links around Hatcher's thick, limp wrist. The other he fastened securely to the steel post that supported one corner of the bunk. Then he systematically searched the man's pockets, making sure the lawman did not carry the keys to the handcuffs.

Satisfied, Morgan picked up the lamp and backed out of the cell. He closed the door and turned the key in the lock, placing the lamp back up on its bracket. Carrying the ring of keys he returned to the office.

He worked faster there, not knowing what second someone might come in and discover him. He found his own matched sixes in another desk drawer and snuggled them into his empty holsters with satisfaction. Then he went to the door.

He stepped out on the street, glancing hastily up and down. No one was near him. Over at the Winchester, light streamed from the windows and around the batwings, and he saw the dim shapes of horses at the hitchrack.

Hatcher would be out for some time, and it would take an even longer period for his yells to attract attention. Morgan had little to worry about there and he grinned when he pictured Hatcher's face after the man had regained consciousness.

Morgan slipped around the corner of the jail and between the buildings to the dark yard in the rear. Blue Hawk came out of the darkness.

"This way, Senor," the Yaqui said hastily. "We ride fast?"

"Not yet. I still haven't had a chance to look over Gardner's office."

"It will be a risk, Senor," Blue Hawk said. He made no further objections, led the way into the shadows and soon Morgan saw Midnight's dark form.

He spoke an affectionate word to the horse and then unstrapped the bed-roll from the cantle. He worked swiftly, adjusting cloak and mask and black Stetson. In a short time the Masked Rider, tall and mysterious, stood there.

"There's a tree by the Winchester, Blue Hawk," he said. "I'm usin' it to get into Gardner's office."

"Yes, Senor. We will circle wide and come up behind the saloon."

The two riders took a wide loop around the town, working their way silently to the rear of the Winchester. The Masked Rider saw that the upper story was completely dark and a brief smile of satisfaction touched his lips.

He swung out of saddle, tossed the reins to Blue Hawk, then ghosted up to the dark shadow of the tree. He looked upward, placed Gardner's office window and saw that a thick limb swayed just beneath it. Like a mountain cat he sprang upward, grasped the first of the low limbs and pulled himself into the leaves. He worked on higher, moving with swiftness and sureness.

Finally he crouched on the limb beside Gardner's window. The lower sash was raised to admit the cool night breezes. The Masked Rider listened, every sense keened. Satisfied, he edged forward, reached out and grasped the sill. It took only a moment to pull himself inside.

He stood silent another moment, half crouched. There was no sound, no movement. At last the Masked Rider moved deeper into the room and his outstretched hands touched the desk. He pulled open the top drawer and heard papers rustling.

Taking a chance, he struck a match. Swiftly he passed over invoices for liquor, and all the stock that Gardner used in the saloon below. That exhausted the top drawer. Striking another match, the Masked Rider pulled open the second drawer.

He saw some rocks and held them to the light a moment, puzzled. Certain veinings in the rock held his attention. Then, realizing the need for haste, he replaced the rocks and searched further. Suddenly he straightened with a soft exclamation.

THE letter he held in his hand was from the Continental Mine Development Corporation, and dated not long before. The cold eyes behind the domino mask quickly scanned the copper-plate handwriting that informed:

We must be sure you have full title before we can go further. Your samples and report are interesting and we are anxious to investigate Rifle Valley further. When we are satisfied with your clear title, we will extend an option to cover the period of our further surveys. If those surveys live up to expectations, there is no reason why we should not come to a mutually profitable understanding.

The Masked Rider replaced the letter, lips grim. He struck another match and raised a second sheet to its light. This was from a railroad company. He had only time to read the first word or two when a door slammed below.

Instantly he replaced the letter and snuffed out the match. Lithe steps took him to the window and he swung outside. He caught onto the limb and pulled himself into the protection of the leaves. At that instant a light shown through the window behind him.

King Gardner came in, holding a lamp. Snake Bannon followed close behind him. Gardner placed the lamp on the desk and sat down, frowning. Bannon waited impatiently,

tapping his fingers in a nervous rhythm on the desk.

"Nothin' can go wrong, Snake," Gardner said finally. "I figgered to hold him till somethin' happened to Zack. People'd think less about it if they thought he was a killer."

"Yuh can't run the chance, King," Snake growled. "Shore, mebbe Mort won't let him see anybody. But I'd feel better if he was in Boothill. Don't forget he saw Scar use his rifle on old McCloud."

"I'm not forgettin'," Gardner sighed. His fist struck the desk. "We had everything all planned out and lined up! It couldn't go wrong. Then this Wayne Morgan has to wander in to see Scar salivate Zack. Then the Masked Rider shows up. We got to work fast, Snake, with that masked gent around—and make no mistakes."

"That's why I say kill Morgan. Then we can take care of the Masked Rider."

"All right, Snake," Gardner agreed. "You can take care of him tonight. I reckon Mort Hatcher can be away from the jail when yuh pay yore visit."

As the Masked Rider realized he was listening to these two plan his own death, already Snake Bannon had turned and walked out the door.

The Masked Rider moved slowly back on the limb toward the trunk of the tree, keeping his eyes on King Gardner. The man did not move, did not hear the slight noise the Masked Rider made. At last the cloaked figure reached the trunk and started to descend. He dropped from the last limb, catlike, to the ground.

He waited a moment, glancing up. The yellow light still streamed out the upper window and Gardner had not been alarmed. The Masked Rider ran silently into the shadows and reached Blue Hawk. He took the reins and vaulted into the stallion's saddle.

"We're teachin' a killer a lesson, Blue Hawk, and givin' him a warnin'. He plans to kill Wayne Morgan in his jail cell."

"That would be hard to do," Blue Hawk replied gravely, and the darkness hid the slight twinkle in his normally impassive eyes.

Once again the two men circled the town and drifted down on the jail. The Masked Rider's eyes searched every shadow and his ears were keened for any sound. He did not know if he had beaten Snake Bannon here or not. Finally he dismounted and, with a short word of caution to Blue Hawk, drifted up to the jail building.

He edged along the wall until he was beside the window of the cell where he had been a prisoner. He heard no sound, except that of deep breathing. Cautiously he peered inside. The lamp still glowed in the corridor, throwing enough light into the cell so that the bunk could be dimly seen. Hatcher still lay there, apparently in the same position in which the Masked Rider had left him.

Just then he heard the corridor door open. Snake's call echoed in the cells.

"Mort! Where in blazes are yuh?"

He came down the corridor. The Masked Rider peered around the corner of the window. Snake came in, then stopped and turned as though to go back to the office. Just then Hatcher moved and groaned. Snake swung around as though he'd been shot.

"Mort!" he called again.

Hatcher stirred and Snake came to the cell door. He peered inside, then cursed. He took the lamp from the bracket and returned to the door, holding it high. He recognized the handcuffed man on the bunk, for just then Hatcher opened his eyes and tried to move his arm. The handcuffs clinked.

SNAKE broke into a series of blistering oaths. He placed the lamp on the floor and grabbed the bars, trying to open the door, then rushed back to the office.

Hatcher regained full consciousness and realized what had happened. He tugged against the handcuffs but only succeeded in hurting his wrist. He swung carefully around so that he could sit up in the bunk. He yelled.

"All right!" Snake roared. "I'm huntin' for the keys now!"

"I'll kill that Morgan!" Hatcher threatened.

Snake's mocking laugh made Hatcher curse more bitterly. At last Snake came with another ring of keys. He fitted two to the lock and the third one finally opened the door.

When he stepped inside, the Masked Rider left the window and edged to the front of the building. A quick glance showed that no one was near the jail. He slipped to the door, gently eased it open. With a single, quick flowing motion he was inside and just as gently had closed the door behind him. He lifted the Colts from the holsters and catfooted to the jail corridor.

Snake had the lamp inside the cell now. His scorching tongue raked Hatcher like a spur and the sheriff fairly sizzled with anger. The Masked Rider heard the clink of the links and Snake spoke up disgustedly.

"Locked in yore own nippers. Even had the key taken. What a tophand lawman you make! Was yuh plumb asleep?"

"He tricked me, I tell yuh!" Hatcher blazed. "Yuh'd be fooled just as I was. Quit yore arguin' and get a file. There was only one key to these cuffs and I lost it. Wait'll I get my gunsights on that Morgan!"

"Yuh'll never see him again," Snake jeered.

He stamped out of the cell and started up the corridor. He sensed rather than felt the presence of the man in the doorway and jerked up his head. Then he saw the masked figure. His hand slapped downward to his holster, but the Masked Rider's Colts leveled

down, beating Snake's draw by seconds.

"Yuh're careless, Snake," the deep voice derided. "Now raise yore hands high so's I can see 'em."

Slowly Snake's hands edged upward. Hatcher was quiet, listening to the new voice in the corridor. The Masked Rider came forward, holstering one six. He lifted Snake's Colt from the holster and threw it in Hatcher's cell, but beyond the manacled sheriff's reach. The Masked Rider stepped back.

"The jail has a new prisoner," he said, and smiled grimly. "Wayne Morgan ain't here to be killed."

Snake Bannon said nothing. He stood quietly, eyeing the steady gun the Masked Rider held on him. Hatcher's links clinked against the steel and the sheriff chuckled deeply.

"Now who's the gent that gets caught flat-footed?" Hatcher derided. "Snake, you ain't got no room to talk."

"Shut up!" Snake growled without turning his head.

"Yuh came here to kill Wayne Morgan," the Masked Rider said. "He was arrested on a trumped-up charge and yuh had to shut him up. I think yuh'll do as messenger boy from me to yore boss."

Snake flushed angrily and his lips curled.

"Who's my boss?" he demanded truculently.

"King Gardner," the masked man answered levelly. "Tell King that I'm taking a hand in this game. Tell him that the Diamond H and M Bar C will soon be told who is behind all the trouble they've been havin'. King and the rest of you renegades have a little time to pull out of Rifle Valley with a whole skin. Yuh'd best take the warnin' and leave. That goes for you, Hatcher."

"Why yuh blamed outlaw!" Hatcher snarled impotently. "I'll run yuh down and have yore hide when I'm out of this!"

"Others have thought the same thing, Hatcher. None of 'em ever succeeded. Others are in Boothill. Think it over. Snake, you can pass the word to Limp Denton, too."

Snake gasped in surprise. His eyes narrowed and he licked his lips nervously. Suddenly his head cocked a little to one side as though he listened for a sound. The Masked Rider heard it an instant later—boot heels rapping along the planked sidewalk, approaching the jail. Bannon's lips broke in a grin.

"Talk fast, owlhooter," he jeered. "Yuh ain't got long. Them's friends of mine."

"Into the cell," the Masked Rider snapped.

He took a quick step forward and jabbed the barrel of his gun in Bannon's stomach. The red-headed renegade backed into the cell, eyes sparking. The steps outside sounded louder.

THE Masked Rider slammed the cell door shut. Bannon had left the new ring of keys in the lock and a twist of the wrist turned the key. The Masked Rider withdrew it. Bannon cast a quick look into the far corner where his six lay.

"Remember my warnin'," the Masked Rider snapped. "I don't give a second one."

"First get out of this trap yuh're in," Bannon jeered.

The Masked Rider moved fast. He was down the corridor before Snake Bannon could scoop up the six in the far corner of the cell. The big renegade let out a yell and flung himself against the cell door. He thrust his gun through the bars and fired blindly at an angle up the corridor.

The Masked Rider threw the keys into an empty cell. He had reached the door when Bannon's slug whined wildly off a steel bar and splattered against the ceiling. The Masked Rider pulled the corridor door shut and jumped for the lamp on the sheriff's desk, snuffed it out.

He heard Bannon's call for help and a muffled shout of alarm outside on the street. The Masked Rider jumped to the door and flattened himself against the wall beside it. Boots pounded loudly and the door was burst open. Half a dozen men stumbled into the darkness.

As the last one cleared the door, the cloaked figure swept noiselessly through it to the street. A dark figure jerked from a leaning position against the wall and called a surprised challenge. The Masked Rider didn't answer, but met and beat the lookout's swift draw. Both guns blasted almost together. The man yelled and grabbed his shoulder.

The Masked Rider swept around him and plunged to the corner of the jail. He heard Bannon's blasphemous shouts and the sudden confusion inside as all the gunhawks tried to push through the door at once.

CHAPTER IX

Diamond H

LIKE a black ghost, the Masked Rider sped along the side of the jail, then cut diagonally across the dark yard. Blue Hawk came up with the horses and the Masked Rider threw himself into saddle. Someout shouted behind them and the flame from a six-gun licked like an evil orange tongue.

The bullets were wild, however, in the darkness. Midnight's mighty muscles hurled horse and rider forward and Blue Hawk raced close behind. The two riders cut directly away from the town. There were some more shots but none came near them.

for gunhawks were only shooting at the night.

For a while the two friends rode hard, then the Masked Rider drew rein. He twisted around, looking back in the darkness toward Rifle Rock. At last he straightened and chuckled.

"They'll be havin' a hard time gettin' Hatcher loose," he observed. "And I gave Bannon a warnin' that he'll pass on to King and Limp. I want to get 'em worried, rush 'em, so's they'll show their hand through some mistake."

"Now Wayne Morgan is wanted, and so is the Masked Rider," Blue Hawk said. "They will make our work hard, Senor."

"That's happened before," the Masked Rider answered, "but I think I'm due at the Diamond H. It'll be a fair enough hidin' place for Wayne Morgan. What have you learned, Blue Hawk?"

"There may be copper, Senor, in the north end of the Valley. I found traces in several small pockets up in there, hard to get to. Of course, Senor, it would take a mining man to know. I am not too well-trained in these things."

"I know that." The Masked Rider frowned thoughtfully into the darkness. "And it puzzles me about Gardner. What would a saloonkeeper know about mineral deposits and values?"

"Maybe he has not always been the saloonkeeper, Senor."

"That might be. I'll do some questionin'."

The Masked Rider dismounted and removed cloak, mask and hat. He rolled them up and soon they were tied behind Midnight's cantle. Wayne Morgan grinned up at the Indian.

"I reckon I'll have to borrow yore hoss, Blue Hawk. Like I said, I'll be ridin' to the Diamond H tonight."

Blue Hawk dismounted. "I have seen cattle moving north, Senor," he remarked. "The men who drove them looked like gunslammers."

"North?" Morgan queried. "Now I wonder if Bannon has hit the Diamond H herd again. It would be the thing to do to stir up more trouble. Yuh're close to the hide-out now Blue Hawk, so yuh can walk it and get some rest. You lead Midnight, since he won't let nobody but me ride him. Then watch Rifle Rock and if yuh see anything suspicious, meet me at the Diamond H."

"Yes, Senor. Good luck."

Morgan swung onto Blue Hawk's mount and rode easily away, heading toward the Diamond H. Now and then he thought of Mort Hatcher, a prisoner in his own cell, and he chuckled. It would take a file before the worthy sheriff would be rid of the steel bands on his wrists.

Morgan rode steadily and at a fairly fast clip. The night was dark but by now Morgan was familiar with the Valley. Before long he saw a glitter of light ahead and knew it to be the Diamond H. He came closer and suddenly pulled up, frowning.

There were too many lights. Every window of ranchhouse and bunkhouse glowed. Lanterns bobbed across the yard and Morgan heard the impatient whinny of a horse. He recalled Blue Hawk's report of cattle being driven across the valley. Morgan's wide lips pressed in a straight, angry line.

Buck Henry was ready to ride on a war trail! Morgan knew it as well as if he had been told. The Diamond H was on the verge of falling into Gardner's trap and continuing the useless war against the M Bar C.

Morgan loosened the Colts in his holster and spoke a word to the horse that sent it streaking ahead toward the lights and the arming ranch.

As he came closer, Morgan saw that the ranchyard was filled with mounted men, who waited close to the ranchhouse. The Diamond H looked armed to the teeth and waiting only a word to start the Rifle Valley war in earnest. Morgan urged the horse to greater speed.

The men in the yard heard the heavy drum of Morgan's horse. Some of them swung around and guns flashed up. They waited, tense. Morgan rode into the yard and the heavy suspicion on the men's faces did not lessen. At least a dozen guns covered this stranger who had ridden out of the darkness.

Morgan apparently did not see the Colts that threatened him as he rode up to the steps and dismounted. At that moment the door opened and Buck Henry stepped out. The peppery little man carried a rifle in his hand and a gun-belt circled his waist. Morgan saw young Jed Henry just inside the door. The young man's face was drawn and troubled.

BUCK HENRY did not at first recognize the new arrival. Then his eyes narrowed in recognition.

"Yore name's Morgan, ain't it?" he asked.

"That's right. A friend of yores sent me." Morgan's glance circled the waiting, armed men. "I reckon I came just in time, too. Could we have a pow-wow inside?"

Buck Henry hesitated, then stepped aside and opened the door.

"Step in. But make it fast, hombre. We got work to do."

Morgan stepped into the kitchen, with Buck Henry close behind him. Jed Henry's hand dropped to his gun and he flashed a questioning glance at his father, who shook his head.

"I heard yuh might be along any time, Morgan." Buck Henry was short and sharp. "What yuh got to tell me?"

"The Masked Rider watched some cows rustled today," Morgan drawled. "From yore

boys bein' all set for a scalpin' party, I'd say they was yores."

"They was!" snapped the rancher. "And I've stood enough from the M Bar C. The trail led right to their range."

"Disappeared, didn't it?" Morgan asked quietly.

"Shore—like all the rest. McCloud—or that Limp Denton—is mighty smart in hidin' trail. I reckon we ain't takin' any more. We're ridin' over there and callin' a showdown."

"The Masked Rider saw them cows," Morgan repeated in a slow drawl, "and the M Bar C wasn't chousin' 'em along."

"Yuh mean that?" Jed Henry asked eagerly.

His father's wrinkled face screwed up.

"When did yuh see this masked gent?" he demanded.

"Not more'n ten minutes ago." Morgan's keen eyes weighed the two men, his quick brain deciding what course to take. "The same gent that directed the shootin' of McCloud planned the rustlin' of these cows. That gent wants yuh to fight, Henry, and when yuh burn powder, yuh're doin' it for him."

"Who is he?" Buck Henry was quivering with eagerness.

"The Masked Rider knows that," Morgan said coolly, "and I've got some ideas myself. But I can't prove 'em yet. Send yore men to the bunkhouse, Mr. Henry, and forget yore loco ideas."

Old Henry bristled. "I do as I please."

Morgan spoke quietly, almost in a whisper, yet his words had the impact of battering fists.

"I had orders from the Masked Rider to keep yuh peaceful, Mr. Henry. I'll do it if I have to use Colts. Yuh ain't makin' this mistake."

Buck's face turned a deep, angry red. His hand dropped, and he took a half-step forward. Jed swiftly intervened. He stepped close and grabbed his father's gun wrist.

"Hold yore temper, Dad. I figger this hombre's right. Seems like yuh gave a promise once to the Masked Rider that yuh'd stay right here on the spread no matter what happened."

Buck Henry's anger slowly receded and his eyes wavered.

"It's hard just settin," he complained, "not knowin' what's goin' to happen to yuh next. I've held things in until I'm plumb ready to explode."

"Yuh'll get yore chance to explode," Morgan promised, "but it'll be at the right time and place."

The Diamond H owner made a gesture of surrender. He stepped to the door and barked orders that dismissed the men. Morgan heard angry mutterings but the men slowly broke up, leading their horses back to the corrals. Buck Henry went out into the yard, leaving Morgan and Jed alone.

"Yuh're glad yuh don't have to ride against the M Bar C," Morgan said quietly. "Yore dad had yuh in a bad spot."

"How do you know?" Jed asked quickly.

"I saw you and Miss Rita the mornin' before McCloud was shot, and I can kind of put two and two together. Keep as close a check on the M Bar C as yuh can, Jed. Miss Rita might be needin' yuh mighty fast."

Jed straightened, alarm in his eyes. "She's in trouble?"

"Not bad yet," Morgan said, "but just be ready."

Buck Henry came back in the room and Morgan turned away from Jed. His move clearly showed that he would not again mention Rita to the young rancher. Old Henry threw his hat on the table and sank wearily into a chair. He glanced up at Morgan.

"How come yuh're here?" he wanted to know.

"I have to lay low for a while. Mort Hatcher arrested me—for shootin' Zack McCloud."

The silence was thunderous. Buck Henry jerked as though he had been hit. Jed froze, his face stunned and questioning. Morgan sank down in a chair and calmly rolled a cigarette.

"I didn't shoot Zack," he said coolly, "but I saw the hombre that did. That's plumb bad medicine for a couple of gents I ain't mentionin' yet. They had to get me where I couldn't talk to no one."

The rancher caught a sharp breath. "Then who shot Zack?"

MORGAN described the man in great detail, saying that the unknown rifleman was called "Scar," though he made no mention of how he had come to know this. Buck Henry and his son hung on every word, then the older man shook his head with a resigned sigh.

"I've seen the hombre. Hung around the Winchester for a spell and then plumb disappeared." Suddenly his eyes widened, and he looked up at Morgan. "Hung around the Winchester! Then King Gardner is somewheres in this mess—and that red-headed gunhawk, Bannon."

"Yuh'd be surprised who is in it," Morgan answered steadily. "There's a heap of things to be proved yet and the renegades have got to be smoked out into the open. I do know this, though—that if I'd stayed in Hatcher's jail, I'd have been in Boothill by mornin'."

"How did yuh get out?" Buck Henry asked and Morgan told him.

By the time he had finished, the rancher and his son were grinning widely. The father

slapped his knee and broke into a loud laugh.

"I'd shore like to have seen Hatcher! That worthless skunk has had it comin' to him for a long time!"

"Then I can hole up here?" Morgan asked.

"Shore, but we'd best not say nothin' to the boys. Yuh're just a new hand." Buck Henry pinched his lips together with his fingers and looked shrewdly at Morgan. "I'm takin' a long gamble on yuh, pilgrim, and the word of an outlaw about yuh. That's a mighty shaky loop. Don't do nothin' that'd make me plumb suspicious and change my mind."

"I'll just ride yore range and do yore work until I hear from the Masked Rider," said Morgan. "But don't be surprised none if I ain't around some mornin'. Reckon I'd best get out to the bunkhouse now."

He arose and old Henry walked with him out into the yard and to the bunkhouse. There he was introduced as a new hand and given an empty bunk in which he dumped his bed-roll. No explanation was given to the men and they eyed Morgan with curiosity.

After the boss had left, the men started that slow, guarded speech by which they greeted a stranger. Morgan was friendly enough and gradually the men thawed. But they were still puzzled by the circumstance of his coming, the conference with the Diamond H owner, and Morgan did nothing to explain.

The next morning he rolled out with the rest. After breakfast he roped and saddled his horse and waited orders for the day's work. The rancher and his son divided the men, one group riding north toward the M Bar C line. Morgan rode with them, just behind young Jed.

When they reached the line fence, Jed detailed the men to check it for breaks. Others spread out to tally on Diamond H cows that were in the vicinity.

Morgan realized that they must be close to where the cattle had been stolen the day before. He and a stubby, bow-legged cowboy named "Top" turned eastward along the fence.

There was no sign of break in the fence. Top told of the rustling of the day before and the way it had been discovered, speaking in the long, drawling accents of the typical Texan. Morgan only half listened, for the method was an old story to him.

The two of them crested a small rise and Morgan saw a row of trees along a narrow stream. He also saw a break in the fence and called Top's attention to it. They spurred forward.

Morgan drew rein close to the fence and looked down at the ground. There were

"I'm Tellin' Yuh, Boss—Yuh Can't Bring a Bunch of Gunslicks and Rustlers to This Ranch!"

FOREMAN "HOODOO" TURNER of the Rocking M spoke sharply—but ranch owner Dan Mallory merely shrugged.

"Slade Corrigan and his crew are here to stay," he announced. "I can't rightly explain it now, but that's how things are!"

The new regime at the Rocking M leads to plenty of gun trouble—and the mystery keeps right on deepening until Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider, and his faithful Yaqui pard, Blue Hawk, take a hand in the game. Then a sinister plot explodes wide open!

It's more than thrilling—it's a rip-snorting humdinger from the word go—GHOST GUNS, by Donald Bayne Hobart, a Masked Rider novel packed with excitement and action in every paragraph!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

traces of the stolen cattle and in two places Morgan saw the clear track of a horse. He straightened, following the trail with his eyes into M Bar C range.

Even as he was studying the trail, with startling suddenness, three men rode out of the cottonwoods beyond the line fence. They were close before Morgan knew of their presence. Top grunted a soft warning.

"M Bar C rannies and their segundo. Keep your Colt loose."

Morgan had seen Limp Denton. For an instant he had thought to rein around and ride off, but knew it was useless. For already the segundo had spotted him. Wayne Morgan slouched a little in his saddle and his hands carelessly dropped close to the Colts snuggled to his thighs. His mild blue eyes chilled a bit, but there was nothing else to show his tension.

Denton and his men came riding closer. They slowed their horses and edged up to the line. Limp's dark eyes filled with anger as he stared at Morgan. His hand trembled a little on the saddle-horn.

"So yuh were a Diamond H rider!" he snapped. "How did yuh get out of jail?"

"Walked out," Morgan answered placidly, and Limp's anger boiled over.

"Yuh killin' snake!" he said, through set teeth, and his hand flashed down to his holster.

Morgan's hands blurred and the heavy Colts jumped up to cover the three M Bar C riders. They froze, fingers still taloned over their gun butts. Top gasped in amazement at Morgan's speed. The wandering cowboy sat bleak-faced, guns steady.

"Yuh come close to killin' yoreself, Denton," he drawled. "Don't try that again. Did yuh come over this way to rustle some more Diamond H critters?"

"Look who's talking!" Limp flared. "Tryin' to cover yore own tracks by raising dust. Top, this hombre yuh ride with shot Zack McCloud! He was arrested for it and I don't know how he got out of jail. He's wanted and wanted bad. Tell Henry he shore brought trouble to his spread."

"Turn around, Denton," Morgan said quietly, "and keep ridin' back home. It'll be a heap healthier all around."

DENTON sneered at him openly, and there was a light of suppressed triumph in his eyes. Without a word, he turned his horse and spoke a brief order to his men. They gave Morgan a long, hard look, then rode after their boss. Not once did they look back and Morgan remained still and motionless.

At last he holstered his guns. He caught Top's sliding glance and knew the puncher had been studying him. Morgan said nothing, but he sensed a coldness in Top's attitude. The Texas cowboy became as silent as he had been talkative before the encounter with Limp. Morgan still said nothing, and soon Top spoke curtly.

"I reckon we'd better be gettin' back to Jed. He'll want to know about this fence."

They rode back along the fence, both men silent. Now and then Top glanced at Morgan from the corner of his eyes. His expression slowly changed from one of suspicion to deep dislike. He edged his horse a little further from Morgan. At last they came up to Jed Henry.

"Met Denton and some M Bar C boys," Top said coldly. "Found the break in the fence. Denton made some claims about Morgan here, but I reckon he can tell yuh what about."

Jed looked up, alarmed. "Any trouble?"

"None," Morgan said quietly. "Denton had some ideas about makin' a ruckus, but he changed his mind. I'd like to talk to yuh, Jed."

He rode off a distance with Jed Henry. The young man's face was puzzled and twisted with worry. Morgan finally drew rein out of earshot of the rest of the men.

"Denton accused me of shootin' Zack and Top heard him," he said. "I reckon the rest of the boys will know about it soon. I'm pullin' stakes, Jed. Denton is shore to send Hatcher out here and yuh won't have no trouble if I ain't around. Tell Hatcher yuh found out about me and let me go."

"What will yuh do?" Jed asked.

"I'm ridin' back to the ranch now. May hang around until tonight. Don't worry about me, Jed. That's Gardner's job. Say, was Gardner always a saloonkeeper?"

"I don't rightly know," Jed answered, surprised. "I've heard he used to manage or own a mine somewheres, but lost it. Gamblin, I've heard. It's all just talk."

"Thanks. That clears up a point." Morgan smiled tightly. "Tell yore boys to keep their dander down. . . . Well, I'll be ridin' back to the home ranch."

He wheeled his horse around and started away across the range, toward the distant Diamond H. Jed watched him a while, then slowly turned back to his men.

CHAPTER X

Open Warfare

A LITTLE after noon, Morgan reached the Diamond H buildings. Limp Denton, he knew, would not as yet have had time to reach Rifle Rock and report Morgan to Hatcher. But sooner or later the sheriff would be on his way, smarting under the trick that had been played on him.

Buck Henry was not around the spread

and the cook fixed a meal for Morgan. When the waddy had finished eating he came out of the cookshack door, leaned against the building and looked toward the barn. He caught a slight flicker of movement at one corner and Blue Hawk gave him a quick signal. Morgan casually straightened and strolled toward the barn. Blue Hawk waited behind it.

"Two strangers have come to Rifle Rock," the Yaqui reported, "and King Gardner is much excited."

"Do yuh know who they were?"

"Yes, Senor." Blue Hawk nodded. "One is a mining man. The other is from a railroad and he argues with Senor Hatcher. The sheriff will not let him leave town."

"Minin' and railroad!" Morgan exclaimed. "Blue Hawk, Gardner's bein' pushed faster than he planned to go. They're callin' his hand on the sale of Rifle Valley and Gardner has to produce. Things'll break wide open, Blue Hawk."

"It is time, Senor."

"Yes, it's time," Morgan answered gravely. He touched his holstered Colts. "Time for gunsmoke and a heap of killin'."

Morgan told Blue Hawk to meet him out on the range, then he returned to the bunkhouse, gathered up his bed-roll and then went to the corral. In a short time he had his horse roped and saddled. The cook watched him mount.

"Yuh shore didn't work here long," he exclaimed.

"Yuh'd be surprised how long I been workin' for Buck Henry," Morgan said, and grinned. He waved his hand. "Adios, amigo, I'll be ridin' this way again."

He rode out of the yard, cut a little to the right and headed for a distant grove of trees. Blue Hawk met him there and the Yaqui fell in beside him. Morgan set off in a direct line for the hide-out which they reached with all speed.

In the canyon pocket he dismounted and changed his saddle to Midnight. The stallion was all eagerness to be racing down the dangerous trails the Masked Rider always took. Morgan grinned at the horse and glanced up at the western sky. There was still plenty of daylight, but the sun had disappeared behind the peaks.

"Just keep yore patience, Midnight," he muttered. "Yuh'll have plenty of runnin' to do before this Rifle Valley trouble is over."

Blue Hawk had the coffee on when Morgan returned to the fire. The Yaqui silently prepared the meal and Morgan sat down beside the glowing embers. He stared into the fire, his quick brain trying to foresee the moves Gardner would make. He would work fast now to gain control of the Valley, driving out the Henrys and the McClouds. Those gunslammers who worked under Snake Bannon would earn their pay from now on. Morgan's face became grim and hard.

After the meal, he returned to Midnight and opened the saddle roll. Shortly, it was the Masked Rider who mounted Midnight and headed for the mouth of the canyon. Blue Hawk followed on the pinto, checking the rifle and shoving it back in the boot under his right leg.

Free of the canyon, they turned toward Rifle Rock. Before they had ridden many miles night settled on the range and the Masked Rider increased his speed. At the edge of the town he drew rein and Blue Hawk rode up close beside him.

"Where are these strangers yuh told me about, stayin'?" the man in black asked.

"Both in the hotel," said the Indian, "but the railroad man spends most of his time arguing at the sheriff's office."

"I'm taking a look at both these gents," the Masked Rider said softly. "You'll have to act as look-out, Blue Hawk."

"You can depend on it, Senor," the Indian said simply.

The Masked Rider worked in a wide loop around the town, drifting up into the dark back yard of the jail. He dismounted and, silent as a shadow, moved along the side of the building. The cells were empty but a light glowed from the office. The Masked Rider eased forward, close to the window and peered in.

A young man was pacing back and forth before the battered desk. He was tall and tanned and obviously angry. Hatcher was leaning back in his chair, whittling, his face set in stubborn lines.

THE steady thump of heels came clearly to the Masked Rider. Then the young man stopped beside the desk and leaned over it.

"But Hatcher," the masked man outside heard him say, "this survey was scheduled long ago. My company has been corresponding with Gardner about it."

"Can't help that," Hatcher grunted. "Seems like yuh'd be glad of a chance to loaf around the hotel a few days."

"My job's surveying railroads," the young man snapped, "not loafing. This spur line to the Pecos Mines is needed. It'll cut wagon hauling completely out and save a hundred miles if trains can go down through Rifle Valley and over the Pecos Ridge."

"That's the mine's trouble, not mine," Hatcher growled. He looked up, muddy eyes glinting with anger. "Now you listen here! I'm doin' this to protect yuh. There's a wanted killer loose in the Valley. I can't let yore surveyin' crew out of my sight. The lobo might kill all of yuh."

"Hatcher," the young man snapped, "I've told you we can take care of ourselves."

"Listen, Edwards," Hatcher barked, his

patience gone, "yuh got my orders. You stay in Rifle Rock till I tell yuh to leave! If yuh ain't got sense enough to stay in a safe place on yore own, then I'll make yuh stay."

"Listen, you stubborn—" Edwards began, but Hatcher's angry roar broke in. The sheriff's chair thumped down hard on the floor as he pushed away from the wall.

"Get out of here, or I'll lock yuh up and yore whole blamed crew! I'm tired arguin'! You stay in Rifle Rock."

The young man called Edwards remained leaning over the desk. His face became pinched and his nostrils flared. Then slowly he straightened and pulled down the sleeves of his coat. He started to say something, but changed his mind, turned and stalked out the door. The Masked Rider heard his steps echoing and fading along the planked sidewalk in the direction of the hotel.

Hatcher sank back in his chair and picked up his stick and knife again. The anger left his face to be replaced by a thoughtful, worried look. He stared for a long time at the opposite wall, then shook his head and started whittling.

The Masked Rider slipped away from the window and cat-footed back to Blue Hawk. He swung into saddle, checking Midnight's eagerness to be off.

"Hatcher is holdin' up a railroad survey through the valley," the man in black told Blue Hawk. "He's stallin', and the surveyor ain't goin' to take much more of it."

"This must have been the new road that Gardner spoke about, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly.

"It is. The railroad will buy right-of-way through the M Bar C and Diamond H. Gardner wants that dinero and the only way he can get it is to own the ranches. Blue Hawk, that smilin' renegade saloon man has a big killin' planned. Railroad money, and he's also found a copper deposit somewheres in the valley. It's a big deal, and Gardner's doin' everything he can to swing it his way. I can see Limp's place in Gardner's plans right now."

"How about the other stranger, Senor?" Blue Hawk suggested. "His room is at the hotel."

"Yuh know which one?"

"Yes. It's on the second floor front. There is a long hall, Senor, and a lean-to in back that is just below an upper window."

"Made for our purpose," the Masked Rider chuckled. "Let's make a call at the hotel."

The hotel was up the street and on the same side as the jail. It was a two-story frame building, not large. The Masked Rider saw that entry by an upper window would be easy. He dismounted again, loosened the Colts in his holster and slipped to the lean-to. His powerful muscles pulled him up onto the shaky roof.

He remained there a moment, listening, then noiselessly went up the pitch of the roof and crouched just below a dimly lit window. He carefully raised his head and peered inside. He looked down the upper hallway.

The mining man's room was at the far end and the Masked Rider could see the closed door. The other doors also were shut and the hallway deserted. The Robin Hood outlaw tested the window and discovered that it was unlocked. Slowly he raised the sash, a delicate job if he was to prevent noise.

At last he stood erect on the roof and raised the sash higher. One booted foot swung inside to the floor and then the black-cloaked figure stood erect in the hall. There was no sound from the near-by rooms, but a muffled laugh sounded from behind the door at the end of the hall.

The Masked Rider cat-footed down the corridor. The voices became clearer and he recognized Gardner's laugh. A deeper voice spoke with sudden seriousness.

"These samples are interesting, Gardner."

"There's plenty more, Powell." That was the saloon man answering. "I've done some minin' in the past and I know a rich deposit when I see one. Yore mines are already just over the ridge at the Pecos and there's a railroad comin' through here. What more could yuh want?"

"Frankly, nothing more," answered the man who had first spoken. "Our geologists and surveyors will give us the full value of the deposit. You have clear title to this land, of course?"

GARDNER hesitated just a moment.

"To most of it, Powell," he said then. "I'd shore like a little time to complete a dicker, though—a matter of a few days. Then there won't be any worry about titles."

"I guess you can have that short a time, Gardner. But I'd like to complete these options while I'm here. Say three days for you in swinging your deal? At the end of that time we'll sign contracts with the land owners, whether you or someone else."

"Three days is mighty short," Gardner objected.

"But my time's valuable, Gardner. I have other things to do and I can't stay in Rifle Valley indefinitely. No, three days should be sufficient if your negotiations are as far along as you say they are."

"All right—three days," Gardner accepted, and then a note of caution came into his voice. "Powell, could yuh keep quiet about why yuh're here?"

"So you can buy cheap?" Powell laughed. "Well, so long as everything's legal, why not? We pay the same rate to you as to someone else, so we can't gain or lose. I'll keep quiet. And now how about a drink to

seal our bargain? Three days and my silence."

The Masked Rider slipped away from the door and back to the window. In another moment he was outside and slipping down the roof of the lean-to. He jumped lightly to the ground. There he rejoined Blue Hawk and the two rode slowly back to the jail, keeping in the deep shadows behind the buildings.

So Gardner had just three days in which to complete his land grab, the Masked Rider was thinking, and the copper was up at the head of Pecos Ridge. Previous surveys of the mining company men must have missed it. Gardner, riding over the Valley since the time he had started his saloon had stumbled onto it.

His trained eye had instantly judged its worth and he had started scheming to get the lode for himself.

JUST as they neared the jail, Blue Hawk interrupted his thoughts.

"Listen, Senor! A man comes riding—fast."

The Masked Rider heard the steady rapid beat of hoofs. A rider was coming into town, and coming in a hurry. The man in black spoke a word to Blue Hawk and swung out of leather. He wanted a look at the man. He was slipping along the jail toward the street when he froze.

The hoofbeats grew louder, and then the Masked Rider glimpsed the horseman who pulled his mount to a sliding halt in front of the jail and burst inside the office. The Masked Rider heard Hatcher's chair thump down.

Bart Malone's excited voice sounded through the window.

"Where's Limp?"

"I dunno," Hatcher answered. "He was here awhile back. Reckon he's at the Winchester. Has somethin' happened?"

"They finally got Zack!" Bart gritted. "Somebody slipped into his room and knifed him! He's dead."

The Masked Rider stiffened in the darkness and his fist clenched. Grim-faced, he listened to Hatcher's grunt of surprise, and the man outside in the darkness heard the false note in it that Malone completely missed.

Hatcher swore luridly.

"It's that Wayne Morgan jasper!" he barked. "I know where we can get him, too! Yuh go to the Winchester and get Limp, Bart. Have him get the M Bar C crew together. I'll get a posse here."

"Where's Morgan hidin'?" Malone demanded.

"At the Diamond H," Hatcher said grimly. "Limp and a couple of yore boys rode in to report it this afternoon. You get Limp. I'm goin' to be busy!"

CHAPTER XI

Gunsmoke

MALONE hurried out of the sheriff's office and soon Hatcher followed him. The Masked Rider hurried back to Blue Hawk and the two rode quickly out of the town. In the darkness the masked man's face was hard and grim.

He set a fast pace so that Blue Hawk's pinto was hard pressed to keep up with him. But the Masked Rider hurried on. Gardner had at last eliminated one of the key men between himself and wealth. Zack McCloud was gone. Now only the girl, Rita, stood between the saloon man and the M Bar C.

Hatcher of course would gather all of Bannon's gunhawks into his posse, and with the M Bar C outfit with him to a man, certain as they would be that Morgan and the Henrys were behind the murder of McCloud, the posse would be a formidable fighting force. With the sheriff at their head, their actions would take on the cloak of legality. They would wipe out the Diamond H and the Henrys, leaving Gardner with a clear field to sweep up the land and close the deal with the mining and railroad companies. McCloud's death had been perfectly timed.

Moreover, if the Henrys were wiped out resisting an illegal arrest by an illegal posse, there would be no heirs to the Diamond H. The ranch and all the Henry holdings would revert to the Territory and be disposed of by order of the court at sheriff's sale. The Masked Rider felt certain that King Gardner had enough control of the situation to make sure that he himself would be able to bid in the property. Then the only other person then standing in his way for a clean-up would be Rita McCloud.

King Gardner, hiding behind Hatcher's lawless posse, had at last brought open war to Rifle Valley. The first thing that would happen would be that the Diamond H would have no owner by dawn, unless—

The Masked Rider urged Midnight to greater speed. He pushed the stallion hard, flinging over his shoulder to Blue Hawk how he figured out the new developments.

The pinto dropped further and further behind and at last Blue Hawk swung his mount toward the hide-out, as the Masked Rider pressed on. Blue Hawk would change mounts, then follow on to the Diamond H. It would probably mean that the Yaqui would be to the rear of the renegade posse and in position to use his deadly rifle to good effect if it was needed.

On through the night the Masked Rider rode. He knew that by now Hatcher's posse

of gunhawks would be gathered. Limp Denton would be riding to the M Bar C to gather that crew for the Diamond H kill. Hatcher's men would strike first though, before the M Bar C outfit could arrive, and the Masked Rider began to see a way to beat the combination that was shaping up against Buck Henry and his son Jed.

He swept down on the Diamond H and into the deserted yard. He was out of the saddle and plunging up the steps to the ranchhouse door almost before Midnight had halted. Alarmed shouts came from the bunkhouse, but he paid no attention to them. His fists beat an imperative summons on the door and Buck Henry jerked it open.

Instantly the Masked Rider stepped inside.

"Tell yore boys it's all right, Mr. Henry," he said hastily, "but tell 'em to get ready for war."

"War!" Henry repeated dazedly.

"Plenty of it," the Masked Rider snapped. "Get out there or yore crew will be gunnin' for me and we'll lose a lot of time. It's runnin' short."

Buck Henry shook his head and stepped out the door. He stopped the rush of cowboys to the house, coming to the defense of their boss. He told them to get saddled and check their guns and ammunition. He came back in just as Jed stepped into the kitchen from the front of the house. He stopped short, watching the Masked Rider. He showed no fear.

"I've heard a heap about yuh, hombre," he said quietly, "all of it good. I don't savvy why they call yuh an outlaw."

"Thanks, Jed." The Masked Rider smiled. He whirled to face Jed's father. "Mr. Henry—Hatcher, Bannon and all his gunhawks are ridin' here as a posse. Limp Denton is ridin' to get his M Bar C boys and hit yuh from another direction. Rifle Valley is ready to blow up."

"Why?" Buck Henry asked.

"Zack McCloud was knifed to death and Wayne Morgan is accused of the job. Hatcher knows he was here. Limp Denton told him."

"Zack killed!" Henry exclaimed.

"Poor Rita!" Jed said quietly.

"That's just the excuse," the masked man said. "I think I know who killed McCloud, and it wasn't Wayne Morgan. It was one of Gardner's men, or one who worked with him."

"That saloonkeeper!" Buck Henry snorted.

"Yes, yuh underrated Gardner all along, Mr. Henry. He's behind the whole deal. Did yuh know that there's a big copper deposit up in the Pecos Ridge that a minin' company wants to corral? Did yuh know the railroad plans to run a spur to the mines beyond the Pecos right through this Valley?"

"Jumping catamounts!" Old Henry sank down in a chair, staring.

THE Masked Rider went on, speaking rapidly.

"Gardner knew these things. Gardner spotted the copper, and Gardner knows the railroad will have to build across M Bar C and Diamond H land. Gardner couldn't see any reason why you and McCloud should profit by what he knew. With the help of his renegade gunslammers, he rustled both of yuh. He's tried to get you two fightin', either wiped out or ruined. Then, at a public sheriff's sale, Hatcher would see that the range was knocked down to him. He could then sell land to the railroad, and mineral rights and options to the minin' companies."

"That saloonkeeper!" Buck Henry half-whispered.

"He was a minin' man in the past. He's shrewd and cold and determined to carry this crooked deal through no matter how many men are killed. His own gain is all that counts with him. Bannon is his right-hand man and Hatcher's law is Gardner's law."

"Then whyn't we just throw a loop around the gent and turn him over to a U. S. marshal if Hatcher won't do nothin'?" Jed asked.

"Proof!" the Masked Rider snapped. "Where is it? I know what Gardner plans and I've convinced you. But could yuh go into a court and make anybody believe it?"

"How about this raid that's comin'?" Buck Henry bristled.

"Hatcher is in charge of that," the masked Robin Hood outlaw told him, "and he's comin' to arrest a man who's wanted by the law. What could be more legal? But we've talked enough and Hatcher will be here mighty soon. Mr. Henry, yuh tell yore men to follow my orders?"

Old Henry lifted his head and stared hard into the steady, cold blue eyes behind the domino mask. He glanced at Jed, who nodded slightly. The rancher pulled himself out of the chair.

"Yuh're in charge, I reckon," he said simply. "I'll tell the boys."

The Masked Rider stepped to the table and blew out the lamp.

"No lights anywhere," he ordered.

He stepped outside with Buck Henry and his son. The cowboys stared in amazement at the masked, cloaked figure. Their boss raised his hand for silence.

"This here's the Masked Rider," Henry told them. "I reckon yuh've heard of him and the things he's done for folks in trouble. Well, the Diamond H is in a bad pinch and we'll burn powder before long. You take orders from the Masked Rider. What he says goes and I'm backin' him to the limit."

"One of you men blow out the lamps in the bunkhouse and cook-shack," the Masked Rider ordered. "Saddle hosses for Mr. Henry and Jed."

"Ain't we makin' a stand here?" Jed asked.

"That's what Hatcher and Gardner will expect. We'll do a little surprisin'." The Masked Rider smiled coldly.

Soon there was not a glimmer of light in any of the buildings. Jed and his father mounted their horses and the Masked Rider looked over the band of men, carefully and deliberately.

"One mistake," he warned, "and the Diamond H can be wiped out. I want every man to do exactly as he's told. Let's ride."

He jumped down the steps and swung into leather. Wheeling Midnight around, he led the way out of the yard at a fast pace. The Diamond H hands strung out behind him.

As the Masked Rider rode he tried to judge about where Hatcher's posse would be by now. He had a fair idea, figuring by the time elapsed since he had left Rifle Rock, and recalled a small grove of trees about two miles further along would be sufficient cover for the Diamond H. That would be as good a place as any to spring his surprise.

That posse of killers, masking their evil intent behind a law badge, would destroy the Diamond H if they reached it. The Masked Rider was grimly determined that they should not.

When he caught sight of the grove of trees ahead, he knew he had arrived well ahead of the posse. He ordered the men into hiding, warning them to keep the horses from making any sound. Buck Henry and Jed drew in close to him.

"We'll stop Hatcher right here," the Masked Rider told them. "There won't be much of a parley. Them renegades will start shootin' pronto!"

"How yuh goin' to challenge 'em?" the rancher asked.

"I'll take that risk. Their attention'll be on me. At the first sign of trouble hit 'em and hit 'em hard. I figger surprise will do the rest."

He said a few more words, then sent the two Henrys to join their men. He rode out a little distance, pulled up Midnight and waited.

It was not a long wait. He heard the low rumble of horses' hoofs before the posse came in sight. He lifted his Colts a fraction from the holsters, then dropped them back.

Soon he saw the dark mass of the posse. They rode compactly for the Diamond H and would pass the cottonwoods several yards to the left. A touch of the reins and Midnight moved to intercept them. The posse had come abreast of the trees when the Masked Rider challenged them.

"Pull up, Hatcher. Yuh're goin' no further!"

INSTANTLY the gunhawks pulled up. Three horsemen detached themselves from the mass and rode forward. As they came closer the Masked Rider recognized Hatcher, Snake Bannon and Gardner. At the same instant, Hatcher let out an amazed oath.

"The Masked Rider! Yuh got plenty of nerve, hombre. Yuh're under arrest!"

His hand dropped down to his gun. At the same moment, Bannon and Gardner made their play. Midnight jumped forward and the move completely surprised the three. The fighting black stallion was on them before their guns could clear leather. Hatcher's mount went down with a squeal of fear. Bannon's gun cleared, and he fired wildly.

The Masked Rider had not as yet touched his Colts. Midnight scattered the three and streaked for the trees. Bannon's single wild shot was the signal for the Diamond H. The men swept out of the cottonwoods and struck the renegades.

Instantly guns blasted. The posse milled in wild uncertainty. The Masked Rider circled back, guns drawn now. Bannon and Gardner had exploded into action, trying to join the posse and direct the fight. Hatcher came to his feet, cursing, trying to find his gun that had been knocked from his hand. In the dark of the night the swift movement of horsemen, the lancing dart of gun flame and the steady roar of Colts made everything confusion.

The Masked Rider's guns came in to the battle. A renegade charged at him out of the milling shadows, gun winking evilly as lead sang around the Masked Rider's head. Midnight swerved slightly, and the twin Colts bucked back in the Masked Rider's hand. The renegade tumbled out of the saddle, hit the ground and lay sprawling.

Action was fast and furious. Diamond H had caught the renegades completely by surprise. Bunched, directed by the owner of the spread and his son, the Diamond H crew had split the posse wide open. It was no longer a unit, but little knots of surprised, bewildered gunhawks who had no stomach for the killing lead coming their way. The attempt they made to stand was only half-hearted.

The long suppressed anger of the Diamond H waddies found release in this attack. They had quietly stood by too long while their cattle was stolen and their ranch smirched with charges of rustling. The renegade posse was something tangible to fight, at last. With wild, exultant yells, Diamond H rode down the killers. Saddles emptied, cowboys seemed everywhere at once.

Almost as if a signal had been given, the renegades broke and ran in every direction. Vainly the Masked Rider tried to find King Gardner or Snake Bannon, but in the dust and darkness it was impossible to distinguish any particular man.

His shouted command brought the Diamond H hands up short in their pursuit of the fleeing posse. The Masked Rider did not want the cowboys themselves split up, easy prey for Limp Denton and his M Bar C should the segundo be near enough by now to strike.

The cowboys reluctantly returned.

"Here's our sheriff, lookin' for his six!" Buck Henry suddenly yelled in triumph.

The Masked Rider swung in the direction of Henry's voice. He found the tubby rancher grinning down over a leveled six at Hatcher's twisted face. The Diamond H silently ringed the lawman who kept glaring from one to the other.

"Yuh fired on a legal posse!" Hatcher exploded. "Yuh sheltered two men wanted by the law—Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider! Now yuh all wear the owlhoot brand."

"Yuh're bluffin' nobody, Hatcher," the Masked Rider said quietly. "Yuh're finished in Rifle Rock and so is Gardner. Mr. Henry, take him to the ranch. He'll have till mornin' to talk. If he hasn't told what he knows by the time we ride to get Gardner, then he'll go to jail with the rest of 'em."

Hatcher sobered. Buck Henry gave curt orders for him to mount one of the riderless horses that stood near-by. Without a word of protest, the hulking sheriff obeyed. The cowboys circled him and headed for the Diamond H. The Masked Rider called old Henry over.

"I'm ridin' to the M Bar C," he informed. "If some of these gunhawks run into Limp, he's liable to turn back. I don't think he'll want to run into the trap that Gardner did."

"What can yuh do at the M Bar C?" the rancher asked.

"Tell Rita McCloud to have her boys in Rifle Rock tomorrow for the show-down. I want the Diamond H there, too, Mr. Henry. But hold yore boys in. There might be trouble, but keep yore sixes in leather till yuh get the word from me. I'll be there."

"How yuh aim to expose Gardner?"

"Leave that to me. Ride to the Winchester and take yore boys inside. Don't show King Gardner that yuh suspect a thing. That's important. Be there just before noon."

"I'll be there," Buck Henry replied firmly, "and I hope yuh ain't makin' any mistake."

"I hope so, too, Mr. Henry. But I'm certain I'm right. See yuh in Rifle Rock tomorrow at noon—at the Winchester, and peaceful."

The Masked Rider rode off into the darkness. Soon he gave the call of the mountain lion and it was answered immediately. Blue Hawk came out of the darkness, riding the roan. His stern face broke in a brief smile.

"Diamond H fights well, Senor," he said. "The gunhawks are all scattered."

"Seen the M Bar C?" the Masked Rider asked.

"No, Senor."

The Masked Rider urged Midnight to a fast pace, cutting across the range toward the M Bar C. He half expected to meet the cowboys riding to attack the Diamond H, but there was no sign of them. The Masked Rider sighed with relief.

Some of the gunhawks must have met Limp and told their story. The segundo of the M Bar C was not willing to attack a spread that would be ready and waiting for him.

CHAPTER XII

The Man With a Scar

HASTENING steadily onward, the two companions of the trail were silent now, intent on reaching the distant ranch. At last, when they saw the lights of the spread, the Masked Rider pulled up.

"We'll scout the place, Blue Hawk. Mebbe Gardner or Bannon is there. I want to know before I try to reach Miss McCloud."

Blue Hawk nodded and the two men drifted slowly up to the shadow of the big barn. They dismounted. Neither Midnight nor the roan would make any attempt to whinny.

The Yaqui and the man in black edged around the corner of the barn and slipped across the darkened yard. They crouched below the window of the bunkhouse and slowly raised their heads, looking within.

The M Bar C hands were clustered around two men who had ridden with Hatcher and had fled from the fight at the cottonwoods. The Masked Rider's eyes widened when he had a clear glimpse of one of the gunhawks. He had a stubbled red beard. A scar pulled down his heavy, loose lips and disappeared under the jaw-bone. Blue Hawk dropped instantly below the window when the Masked Rider touched him.

"I want the hombre with the scarred face, Blue Hawk. Can yuh get him alive without alarmin' the rest?"

"He must come out sometime, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered. "I will have him."

"Good. Hold him at the hide-out. I'll join yuh there."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk whispered again.

The Masked Rider faded away from the bunkhouse, carefully circling it. He worked his way, cat-footed, to the ranchhouse. A light burned in a room to the front but the rear was dark. The masked man carefully tested the back door and it swung silently open. He slipped inside and closed it. From

some room in the front Rita's voice sounded clearly.

"Limp, you should have ridden on to help the sheriff!"

"Yuh've changed yore mind, ain't yuh, Rita?" came Limp's swift answer. "Too bad it took yore father's life to wake yuh up to the sidewindin' Henrys."

"Don't, Limp!" The girl's voice was agonized. "I was wrong. You've proved it."

The Masked Rider slipped down the darkened hall, pressed against the wall. Limp spoke again, this time his voice soft and vibrant.

"Rita, with yore father dead, the Henrys are going to strike hard again, and mighty soon. Yuh need a man to protect yuh, Rita, and see that yuh ain't harmed. I've loved yuh all along, even when yuh wouldn't so much as look at me."

"Not now, Limp," the girl begged, chokingly.

"But now's the time," the renegade persisted. "The parson could marry us right here, secret. We could tell folks whenever yuh think it the right time to. But yuh're in trouble and yuh need my help."

There was a deep silence. The Masked Rider took a single long stride and noiselessly entered the room. Rita sat by the window, head bowed. Limp stood beside her, his back to the Masked Rider. He leaned over the girl.

"Say yes, Rita," he pleaded.

"Wait until tomorrow," the Masked Rider said quietly.

Limp whirled as though he had heard a rattler. Rita gasped and her fine eyes grew wide when she saw the masked figure standing in the door. Her face showed the ravages of grief and tears. Limp's hand dropped to his gun but the Masked Rider's Colt covered him with the speed of light.

"Limp Denton is lyin' to yuh, Miss Rita," the Masked Rider said gravely. "I can prove it. Can yore boys be at the Winchester tomorrow at noon? Yuh'll find out then who's behind the whole trouble in Rifle Valley, who shot yore father, and who the man is who finally killed him."

"Yuh lie!" Limp blazed.

The Masked Rider's cold eyes bored into his.

"The Henrys are innocent," he continued calmly, "and yuh'll see it's true, Miss Rita, if yuh ride to Rifle Rock. I wonder if Denton here dares be at the meetin'?"

Limp's face contorted in an angry snarl. Despite the steady gun leveled at him he made a suicidal play for his own six. The Masked Rider fired as Limp's six cleared leather. The gun smashed out of his fingers and Limp grabbed his hand.

"Make Limp come," the Masked Rider said with swift intentness to Rita.

He moved around Limp and opened the front door. He stepped outside, leaving the girl stunned, her eyes large and round in her drawn face. The Masked Rider cut away from the house, gun still ready in his fist. He heard men out in the yard and someone pounded on the back door. The Masked Rider vaulted the yard fence, then cut along it toward the barn.

THE house door flew open and Limp's angry voice yelled orders.

"He's out front here somewheres. Get the masked son! Shoot him down!"

The Masked Rider reached the barn and Midnight. He could hear M Bar C men call to one another as they scattered through the yard. Their search would soon turn in his direction. The Robin Hood outlaw spoke a quiet word to Midnight. Black horse and rider drifted silently off into the night.

When he reached the hide-out, the Masked Rider discovered that Blue Hawk had already arrived there with the man with the scarred face the Indian had taken prisoner at the M Bar C.

The red-bearded man whom the Masked Rider had heard spoken of as "Scar", cowered before the fire and the flames lighted the livid scar that pulled down his lips and disappeared under his jaw. He glanced fearfully at the silent Yaqui who stood beside him, and then to the masked and cloaked figure that strode over and stood before him. In neither pair of stern eyes did he see any mercy.

"I know you shot Zack McCloud in Rifle Rock," the Masked Rider said with grim finality. "Yuh're Bannon's tool, and he took orders from King Gardner. That right?"

The man licked his loose lips. His hands were tightly tied behind his back. There would be no escape from this little pocket in the canyon. His hard eyes wavered and dropped.

"Why should I tell yuh?" he asked, in a whining voice.

"If yuh don't, yuh won't live long—I can promise yuh that. If yuh do, I might see that yuh get a chance to get off easier. We're after the leader in this deal, not the small fry like you."

"That's a promise?" Scar asked quickly.

"A promise. Tell yore story in Rifle Rock tomorrow before witnesses, and I'll see that yuh're not harmed by anybody. After yuh've told yore story, and it's straight, it'll be the old story of yore turnin' state's evidence, and I'll personally see to it that it sticks. It means a prison sentence, shore, though it can be shown yuh was roped in as a tool for somebody else. The pen's a heap better than a rope, at that."

Scar considered the proposition. There wasn't much choice that he could see. One way, this grim Indian would probably knife him if he didn't talk. The other way, he had

at least a chance for life, and maybe this masked man could get him a fairly light sentence, or maybe sometime he could escape.

"I'll tell what I know," he agreed. "It'll be the truth. King Gardner hisself gave me orders to shoot McCloud. I bungled the job. McCloud was to be killed."

"Then yuh knifed him this time—to make it good," the Masked Rider accused grimly.

"N-no, I didn't!" Scar stammered swiftly. "I wasn't near the M Bar C when Denton—" He shut up suddenly.

The Masked Rider laughed and arose.

"That's what I wanted to know. Bring him to Rifle Rock tomorrow, Blue Hawk. I've got some more witnesses to corral before mornin'."

He left the fire and soon Scar and the Yaqui heard the fading pound of Midnight's hoofs down the canyon.

The Masked Rider rode straight for Rifle Rock. He was tired, but he had to keep going. Just one or two more pieces to fit into the picture and the puzzle would be completed. It had to be done by the time Diamond H and M Bar C gathered in the Winchester a few hours from now. He urged Midnight to greater speed.

The Masked Rider knew that Rita McCloud would be present. A clever bait had been placed before the girl—the identity of her father's killer—and Rita would come to Rifle Rock to find that man. He felt certain that Limp Denton also would be there. The man dared not draw suspicion on himself, no matter how much he feared what the meeting might bring.

When at last the Masked Rider reached the outskirts of the town, everything was dark. It lacked less than two hours until dawn. Moving like a ghost, the Masked Rider rode to the rear of the hotel. By means of the lean-to, he again climbed to the second story and through the window to the hallway.

He cat-footed along the hall to the front and knocked lightly on the door panel. He knocked again. He heard bed springs squeal and a sleepy voice called out in protest.

"What do you want?"

"Yuh're mixed up in plenty of trouble, Powell. Better talk to me now than talk in jail."

There was strained silence, then the Masked Rider heard bare feet slap across the floor. Light suddenly glowed under the crack of the door. It was flung open and the Masked Rider quickly stepped inside. His six-gun covered the nightshirted figure. Powell's mustache bristled in his square face.

"Is this a hold-up?" he demanded.

"It is not," the man with the guns said grimly. "Yore company has offered an option, or is about to, to King Gardner for mineral rights in Rifle Valley. That offer has caused a range war, several deaths and a murder. Do yuh want to clear yore company of complicity in those charges?"

POWELL ran his hand through his shock of black hair, streaked here and there with gray. He abruptly turned and waved to a chair.

"Sit down. We'd better get to the bottom of things. Put that Colt away. You've got my attention completely without the hardware."

An hour later, Powell went down the hall and knocked at another door. Its occupant answered almost immediately. Powell stepped inside and a moment later both men returned swiftly and silently to Powell's room.

"This is the Masked Rider," Powell said to Edwards, the young surveyor who was with him. "He wants to talk to you about King Gardner and your company. I think you'll be amazed at the things he has to say."

The surveyor sat down, gingerly, eyeing the black mask and the glittering crossed gun-belts. But the blue eyes behind the mask were friendly and the lips beneath the mask smiled. Edwards found himself losing his uncertainty and fear, talking freely under the quick questioning of the masked man.

The first false dawn was in the sky when a cloaked and masked figure dropped lithely off the roof of the lean-to and ran to a black stallion. He swung into saddle, neck-reined the horse and soon disappeared beyond the town. Rifle Rock slept peacefully on. . . .

King Gardner came to the Winchester late that morning. His face looked tired and drawn, and the green eyes were clouded with worry. His smile was completely missing and he only growled when Snake Bannon came in. The big gunhawk stepped behind the bar and poured himself a shot of liquor.

"Seen Hatcher?" he asked.

"That cowardly coyote vanished with the first shot," Gardner snarled. "He'll show up in a day or two, when he thinks it's safe. Snake, we muffed things pretty bad last night. We've got just one day left to take care of the Henrys."

"How about M Bar C?" Snake asked.

"Limp will have Rita McCloud married to him by noon," Gardner chuckled. "With Zack dead we shouldn't have any trouble with the girl, Limp workin' for us. It's the Diamond H that worries me. I shore wish Hatcher would show up."

"Speakin' of Diamond H," Bannon drawled, "take a look out the winder."

Gardner turned, saw Buck Henry and his son Jed leading the Diamond H crew into town. He watched them, green eyes spark-

ing with anger, and then turned to Bannon, his fist pounding on the bar.

"We could make the arrest now if Hatcher was here! Everything's gone wrong. What's more, Edwards and his surveyin' crew could slip out easy and tell everybody the whole story about the road if they were a-mind to. Powell gave me some weak excuse this mornin' for not talkin' about what he's doin'."

"Say!" Bannon exclaimed. "What's Henry stoppin' here for?"

Gardner jerked around to the window again. The Diamond H had pulled in to the Winchester hitch-rack and the men had dismounted. Gardner realized suddenly that not a man of them wore a gun. He looked at Bannon, puzzled.

"Get out the back way," he snapped abruptly. "Round up the boys and bring 'em here. I don't like this."

Bannon nodded and ran toward the back. He disappeared just before Buck Henry pushed open the batwings and his crew streamed in behind him. Gardner managed a welcoming smile.

"I'm surprised to see you gents in here. Yuh generally go to the Gunsight."

"We got plumb curious about the Winchester, King," Buck Henry replied affably. "Set the boys up to a drink."

Gardner busied himself pouring drinks, but worry rode him with spurs. Something was in the wind, something threatening his plans. Diamond H had come to the Winchester for a definite purpose and he could sense a hidden tension in these men who leaned against his bar. The two Henrys showed nothing by word or look what was in their mind.

He began to feel a little better when the first of his gunhawks drifted in the door. Now he could have more control of the situation.

Buck Henry noticed the gunslammers trickle in and take seats here and there about the room at the tables. He smiled slightly but paid them no more attention. Snake came drifting in, looked surprised to see the Diamond H.

"Lookin' for trouble?" he demanded directly of old Henry, who chuckled.

"Not a bit. Yuh notice not a one of us has a gun. Plumb peaceful, and a proddy gent would get hauled up for murder was one of my boys salivated."

Snake sent a quick look at King Gardner who bit his lip. Buck Henry was right. Despite all his gunhawks, Gardner couldn't start any trouble. Even if Hatcher was here, there would be no resistance to arrest, and that was what Gardner wanted—a chance to kill the rancher and his son legally. This whole thing was getting more puzzling and more alarming.

A quarter of an hour passed. The silence became deeper, more tense. Snake stood at one end of the bar and betrayed his nervousness by the quick tattoo of his fingers on the wood. King Gardner slopped whisky over a glass when he poured for Buck Henry. The gunhawks stirred restlessly at their tables, puzzled and uneasy.

"Here comes M Bar C," old Henry said quietly. "I see Miss Rita is with 'em."

Gardner looked out the window again. Snake swore softly under his breath.

The M Bar C pulled up to the hitch-rack. Limp Denton was with them, but there was something drawn and haggard in his face. His eyes shifted from Rita McCloud to the men. All of them dismounted and Snake's surprised exclamation sounded loud in the room.

"The girl's comin' in, too! Is this whole Valley gone loco?"

CHAPTER XIII

Roundup In Rifle Rock

RITA McCLOUD calmly mounted the steps of the saloon with her men and followed them inside. Limp Denton avoided Gardner's stare and the saloonkeeper saw the hard-checked panic in the segundo's eyes. Snake had swung around, staring. Rita flashed a look at Jed Henry, long and searching. The young man took an impulsive step toward her, but the girl turned away. Gardner caught himself, firmly pushed down the terrifying thoughts in his mind, and hurried around the bar. He pulled out a chair from one of the tables and Rita coldly thanked him as she sat down. M Bar C hands, narrowly watching the Diamond H, bunched close around the girl.

Gardner realized that Limp was trying to send some desperate signal to him, but Gardner couldn't understand what it was. He choked down the tightness in his throat. Something was definitely up and it had to do with the Rifle Valley troubles. He assured himself that he was in the clear, completely, unless Limp lost his nerve.

It was almost noon when the back door was quietly opened. Gardner swung around at the gasp of surprise that echoed around the room. His eyes widened when he saw the tall, cloaked, masked figure. The eyes behind the domino were cold and glittering, but the wide lips smiled.

"Well," a deep voice said, "this is a regular roundup! Everyone's on time."

Snake Bannon made a strangling noise. He pushed away from the bar and made a fast play for his gun. The heavy Colt had cleared leather before the Masked Rider seemed to move. Then his hands dropped

down and up with the speed of light. Bannon's shot and the roar of the Masked Rider's Colt blended as one.

The door casing by the Masked Rider's head splintered as Bannon's slug smashed into it. Snake himself stood stock-still, his face slack with stunned surprise. His eyes widened and his mouth opened as though he wanted to speak. Then his short front stained red. His gun hand slowly lowered and, almost in slow motion, his fingers opened and the Colt spun around and clattered to the floor. Bannon swayed slightly. Life left him with a rush and he collapsed to the floor.

The Masked Rider looked over the room, both Colts covering the gunhawks. Limp Denton and Gardner remained frozen, staring down at Snake Bannon's slack form. They looked up at the stern, dark figure in the doorway.

"Bannon at least was a fighter," the cold deep voice of the masked man said. "That's more than can be said for the rest of the sneakin' snakes in this Rifle Valley trouble. Gardner, I'd welcome gunplay from you or Limp. Both of yuh deserve killin', and I'm goin' to tell Buck Henry and Rita McCloud why."

Gardner licked his lips nervously and kept his hands in clear sight on the bar. Denton's dark face grew a little pale and cold sweat stood out on his forehead. He looked trapped, ready to break, but he made no move for his guns. The Masked Rider waited a brief moment, then continued talking.

"Rifle Valley has been on the edge of a range war. Diamond H and M Bar C have come to hate and distrust one another. There have been cows stolen from both spreads. Zack McCloud was shot, then knifed. The blame was to be placed in the Diamond H, but a wanderin' waddy named Wayne Morgan had seen the man who shot McCloud, and he had to be shut up. He was accused of the shootin' hisself, and arrested, but it wasn't meant for him to be brought to trial or leave the jail alive."

"Who shot my father?" Rita asked, and she could not control the tremble in her voice.

"I'll come to that," the Masked Rider told her gently. "First, I want to make clear who's been behind this whole deal. He's a man who at one time was a mining man. He found a heavy copper deposit that probably extends over most of the Valley. The few outcroppin's and indications of it was missed years ago when men from the mines beyond the Pecos prospected Rifle Valley. This man I'm talkin' about made inquiries of a minin' company who told him right away that they'd be interested. Henry and McCloud had the right to these minerals and their sale or development. The plotter wanted this for hisself.

"Then he heard rumors that the old freightin' road from the Pecos Mines wasn't satisfactory. A railroad planned to send a spur to them mines, and the best route was through Rifle Valley, across land owned by Diamond H and M Bar C. The man who owned them lands could get a good price from the railroad company for right-of-way. So our plotter had to get rid of Henry and McCloud so's he could profit hisself.

"He found a man who was close to Zack McCloud, a man whose warped brain would stop at nothin' to gain his own ends. This man was used by our plotter."

"But who was the plotter?" Rita asked tensely.

"Yore genial barkeep, King Gardner," the Masked Rider answered.

GARDNER'S face became paper-white. He looked around at the grim cowboys who faced him.

"That's a lie," he said in a quavering voice. "He can't prove nothing!"

"But I can," the Masked Rider interrupted. He didn't turn his head but spoke more loudly. "Mr. Graydon Powell, representative of the Continental Mine Development Corporation."

Powell appeared behind him. He was a large, powerful man who seemed to fill the door. He stepped around the Masked Rider, taking care not to come between Gardner and the Colts that held the room.

"Did you get an inquiry from Gardner here?" the Masked Rider asked. "Did he lead yuh to believe he owned the land where the copper could be found?"

"He did." Powell spoke clearly. "He claimed he controlled most of the Valley, and said he was in process of getting clear title to the rest. We assumed his statement to be true and agreed to hold off until he could acquire full title—from a purchase, we believed. Time passed and we were eager to chart this deposit and come to some arrangement about its development. I came here to wind things up, and Gardner was much upset. He asked for a few more days in which to finish his deal."

"Did yuh believe this deal to be illegal?" the Masked Rider demanded sharply.

"Not at all. I felt that Gardner might not be telling all he knew about the copper lode, but that was between him and the man from whom I assumed he was buying the land. I had no idea he was resorting to murder and range war."

"Thanks, Mr. Powell," the Masked Rider said quietly. He raised his voice again. "Curt Edwards, surveyor for the Pecos Ridge and Apache Railroad."

The young surveyor appeared and Gardner's hands gripped the edge of the bar until the knuckles showed white. Limp Denton edged carefully away from the bar, eyes

held in an almost hypnotic gaze on the Masked Rider. The cloaked figure spoke briefly to Edwards.

"Has the sheriff of Rifle Rock kept you and yore crew from leavin' town?"

"He has," Edwards answered firmly. "He said there was trouble in the Valley. He didn't want my men or myself involved. I tried to argue him out of it, but Hatcher was stubborn. Then I suggested that I contact Diamond H and M Bar C separately. Hatcher then threatened to jail me and all my crew unless we stayed quietly in Rifle Rock until he gave permission for us to leave."

"Hatcher is now bein' held by the Diamond H," the Masked Rider said. "Buck Henry has his signed statement. Hatcher named the man he took orders from and told why Powell and Edwards were kept from seein' the ranchers. Now we come to the shootin' and later murder of Zack McCloud."

Limp Denton had come close to the door. The Masked Rider's gun swung slightly and lined on his chest.

"Don't go, Denton. This concerns you."

Denton halted, looking trapped and dangerous. At that moment the red-haired renegade with the scar came in. Blue Hawk was just behind him. The Masked Rider's voice sounded stern and hard as he spoke to Scar.

"You shot Zack McCloud from the roof of the buildin' next to the Gunsight, didn't yuh?"

The man gulped, looked frightened, then found his voice.

"Yes. Gardner give me orders to. Another gent was to start a fight between the spreads at that time."

"He did start the fight," the Masked Rider said softly. "It was through this gent that Gardner was to gain control of the M Bar C. I don't believe Gardner meant to let the man live long after the job was done. He knew too much about the plot. But Zack McCloud had to be got rid of first, so's the ranch would pass to his daughter. Scar here missed and the job was finished silently with a knife by a man nobody around the M Bar C would suspect. Limp Denton, you stabbed Zack McCloud to death!"

Rita gasped in horror. Jed Henry swore under his breath. Limp Denton jerked as though the Masked Rider's fist had smashed into his face. Only his eyes seemed alive and they had the look of a trapped animal, darting from man to man. The Masked Rider inexorably pressed his point.

"Yuh're in love with Rita McCloud, and have been since yuh first came to the M Bar C. Yuh're insanely jealous of Jed Henry and wouldn't hesitate to kill if it would get him out of yore way. Yuh was a tool ready-made for King Gardner. He promised to rid yuh of the Henrys, father and son. All you had to do was kill Zack, secretly, marry Rita, and have her sell out at a sacrifice to Gardner.

"By that time, if things had gone as planned, Diamond H and M Bar C would have been at one another's throats, each ranch ruined by the range war Gardner was encouragin'. But things went wrong. The minin' and railroad companies called Gardner's hand. He had to act fast and you, Limp, had to run the risk of murderin' McCloud yoreself. Well, it caught up with you."

JED HENRY saw Rita's crushed and agonized look. Killing anger surged up in him and he jumped toward Limp Denton. For a moment he stood between the Masked Rider and the renegade segundo. Limp acted instantly. His hand slashed down to his gun. It blurred up and flamed.

He whirled and ran for the batwings even as Jed fell back, grabbing his shoulder. Gardner had dropped beneath the bar and Buck Henry rushed around one end to block the man's escape. The saloonman's gunhawks clutched at their holsters but the M Bar C hands were instantly ready for trouble.

Limp reached the batwings and for an instant was clear of the milling crowd. Then the Masked Rider's gun spoke, like thunder in the narrow confines of the room. Limp came up on his toes. He grabbed at the batwings but they gave way. He fell through them onto the porch outside.

Rita ran to Jed, who leaned against the bar. Neither of them saw Buck Henry as the rancher stopped Gardner with a blow that cracked off the man's jaw. The plotter against Rifle Valley dropped in his tracks as though he had been pole-axed.

Old Henry swung around and joined the Masked Rider as he strode to the batwings. They knelt over Limp Denton. The renegade's eyes fluttered open and he glared up into the masked face.

"If it wasn't for you," he gritted, and a spasm of pain crossed his face, "I could have had—" His voice failed and his head lolled to one side. He was dead.

The Masked Rider straightened and Buck Henry shrugged eloquently.

"I reckon that winds everything up," the old man said.

"Everything," the Masked Rider replied. "You and Rita McCloud are free to deal with the minin' company, and the railroad will give yuh a fair price for right-of-way. Rifle Valley will be a busy and peaceful place. That's what it should have been all along, but greedy and twisted men sometimes try to change things."

"I reckon Jed and Rita will be gettin' married soon," Buck Henry said, turning to face the batwings. "We shore owe a heap of thanks to you, for the new wealth that's

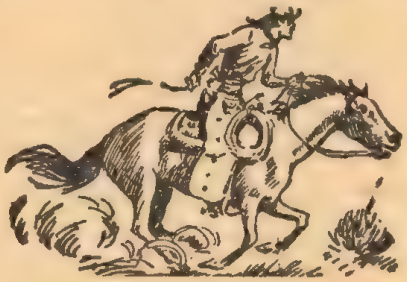
comin', the two spreads here joined, and no trouble ever no more."

He turned back and his eyes rounded with surprise. He was alone with Limp Denton's sprawled body. The Masked Rider had vanished.

Behind the Winchester Saloon, Blue Hawk wheeled the roan around and joined the cloaked figure that sped away from Rifle Rock on the magnificent black stallion. Far out on the range, the Masked Rider drew rein and looked back at the town and over the peaceful range of Rifle Valley.

"Our job's done here, Blue Hawk," he said. "We can pick up the extra hosses at the hide-out and hit the trail again. Somewheres there are good men in trouble, and they need our help. Let's go find 'em."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk replied, and his dark face lighted with a smile.



Further Exploits of the Masked Rider

IN

GHOST GUNS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

NEXT ISSUE'S THRILL-PACKED COMPLETE ACTION NOVEL

You skim off beards in swingtime, men,
With Thin Gillette Blades—four for ten!
Your face looks well-groomed, feels top-grade,
And you get lots more shaves per blade!
Top Quality
at Rock-Bottom Price
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Gillette
4 for 10c
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

"Yuh'll do nothin'," a hard voice grated, "till yuh've unbuckled yore gun-belts and crawled out of there"

MAN-HUNTING MUSTANG

By JACK STERRETT

Half of Jay Hicken's Troubles on the Trail of a Sheriff's Killer Are Over When He Selects a Pard with Good Hoss Sense!

IT WAS almost dark when long-legged, Indian-faced Jay Hicken rode into Cayuse. The main street of the cowtown was quiet.

There was a smile of anticipation on Jay's dark and bony face. Long time since he had been to town. He would call on Sheriff "Dad" Ringle and say "howdy" to his old friend.

He halted in front of the stone jail, noted that there were two horses already hitched to the rack, one a wall-eyed dun. A wild horse, that one, and not local stock—plenty of mustang in that black-legged, buckskin color. But a smart horse, too. You could see that, even though he rolled his eyes and blew like a half-broke bronc.

Jay's booted feet were practically soundless on the bricks as his long legs carried him to the office. He wanted to surprise the sheriff, so didn't knock on the door, but just turned the knob and flipped the panel open. The scene he revealed stunned him with a moment's paralysis.

Silver-mustached Sheriff Ringle was backed against a wall, hands high. In front of him stood a beefy masked bandit with poised six-gun. To one side, mouth open in

a yell of warning, was a third man, a stranger to Jay. Handcuffs dangled from this man's wrists.

Just for the instant, Jay stood rooted, then whipped his right hand toward his gun. The masked bandit, however, was already whirling, whipping his gun around. As he fought to clear his own .45, Jay stared into eyes that, above the masked nose and mouth, bore the glare of a lion—wild and yellow eyes.

Everything happened then. The bandit's gun roared first. Jay felt the sickening sag of his knees and fought it. Then his own gun was blasting, but entirely without aim. Somehow, he couldn't line up. Soft darkness swooped. Through its haze, he saw the sheriff's desperate leap, saw the manacled man trip him, saw the yellow-eyed killer sweep his gun back and heard its deep-throated roar. And then—he saw no more. . .

JAY HICKEN lost enough blood to keep him in bed for a week. But the wound was a clean, round hole under the right shoulder and healed rapidly. He made time and was soon in the saddle again—ready and burning with a hate that would not be tamed until Dad Ringle's murderer was caught. Jay had not smiled since learning of his old friend's death. His Indianlike features were a grim, still mask.

Standing by the fence at the feed corral in Cayuse, Jay scowlingly watched the wall-eyed dun that was kicking his heels and rearing around inside. He questioned "Pert" Wilton, the stableman.

Slow, morose Pert shook his head. "Too much mustang in that dun. Reckon that's why the bandit shucked him in favor of yore big bay. Both hosses was tied to the rail in front of the jail. The killer and the hombre he freed from jail just plain had to make tracks to get out of here whole. Don't blame him for takin' yore bay instead of toppin' that bucker."

Jay's black stare followed the careening dun. There was no mark nor brand on the animal's hide to point to an owner.

"Did anybody ever guess as to who them killers were?" Jay asked.

"Nope. Sheriff died 'fore he could speak. The masked man shot the handcuffed gent hisself and dumped the body beside the trail. Didn't leave a thing in the hombre's pockets, though, and nobody knew that corpse. Nobody doubts it was a plain case of the killer needed to free that hombre before the sheriff could get him to tell about somethin'. They got to quarrelin' as they ran, looks like. Looks like the killer decided his pard had already told and plain needed to be dead."

Pert shrugged as though it was all none of his business nor worry.

Jay swore softly. "Well," he growled, "dab a noose on that hoss and drag him over here, will yuh, Pert? I'm goin' to top him off."

"He's a devil," Pert warned.

"So'm I."

Two days later, Jay rode grimly out of Cayuse on the wall-eyed dun. He was working on a theory and took his going quietly, telling nobody of his purpose. And he went with another gun in a saddle-pouch as well as his hip-gun—and there was jerky, sowbelly, flour and salt and coffee rolled up in his blanket behind the saddle. He was prepared to stay away for a while and it was no part of his purpose to return to his horse-breaking for the Wagonwheel immediately.

Perhaps Jay knew more about horses, both tame and wild, than anybody else in that whole section. He had been tophand at that trade for a long time. And now he meant to put his knowledge to a new test and use.

He rode out from Cayuse a half-day's distance, then just began to drift. In that drifting, he cut a wide, slow circle around the town. Jay was working on the theory that the dun, if just circled easily around and closely watched, would sooner or later betray a desire to head out along some certain trail. The homing instinct.

Jay knew that his own big bay, stolen by the killer, would have returned to the Wagonwheel by now if he had been given the chance. And a raw bronc like the dun, just off the range, would surely line for familiar pasture, if so encouraged.

Circling slowly around distant Cayuse, Jay was not giving the bronc his head right away. The horse was too wild. A man could never know just when he would decide to explode. Also, Jay just wanted to keep the horse circling until he had forgotten Pert Wilton's feed corral.

The first time the dun showed a desire to head in any one direction except toward town, Jay made the most of that. It was the middle of the third day of circling, and hot blood suddenly sang in Jay as the mustang suddenly lifted his head, pricked his ears and started eagerly away to the north.

Jay pulled the dun back, but there was a grin on his dark face. A half-dozen times, just to make sure, Jay circled closer to town or farther away, but every time he brought the dun around that mustang tried to line north. Jay's big fists knotted, his jaw muscles jumped and his dark eyes slitted as the yellow-eyed glare of the masked bandit leaped up in his memory.

Now! He gave the bronc his head.

They bee-lined north. As the days slipped by and the dun showed no desire to travel in any but that one direction, the rider and the horse became acquainted. It came to be, as it will between a man and a horse, that they could almost speak to each other.

A score of times Jay fanned and scratched

that horse and ran him into the ground when he showed fight. And now he was a pretty good horse. He was smart, and gave in to the man and was then treated kindly, and maybe grew to like the tall, dark rider.

Grass was plentiful and game came easy to Jay's six-gun. So they traveled fat. Then, at last, the dun showed a tendency to wander. They were six days to the north of Cayuse and it was now finally as though the mustang had reached his home range and was just scouting around for the wild horse band with which he once had roamed.

HICKEN scowled and cursed softly as he studied the dun's actions throughout all of that day. He tested the horse in a number of ways, and the answer came out always the same. This was that bronc's home.

By his lonely camp-fire on the plains that night, Jay Hicken studied his problem. Here, or near here, was where the dun had first been caught, no question of that. To the west of here was one of the big cattle kingdoms of the region, cow country that belonged to Hank Boyer. Boyer's Line B was famous. And Boyer had a rep for fairness and honesty.

Figuring it all out, Jay decided that, if the outlaw who had killed Sheriff Ringle had come from this section, he was head of some rustler band which had been fattening on the cattle king's herds. Perhaps Dad Ringle had caught one of that crowd and it had become important for the rustler boss to silence the prisoner. Before he slept, Jay had decided to head for Boyer's Line B and see what he could learn.

By daylight, Jay lined cross-country after working out the dun in a wild spree of crow-hopping, buck-jumping and straight, headlong running. The mustang was winded enough to be peaceful now and cantered across the flat country that was knee-high with buffalo grass cut through with sudden hidden gullies and clay and sand cutbanks.

Far in the direction toward which he headed, Jay saw thin smoke and figured it came from a branding fire. Before long he would be joining with some of Boyer's crew. He saw plenty of grazing cows.

Every now and then, Jay Hicken had to head-fight the running dun into jumping a cutbank or gully. Some of these were pretty deep, with sheer side walls that dropped down six feet, and the dun disliked the look of them. But they were nothing that a good cowpony would not take in his stride.

Nevertheless, there came one where the mustang threw his head aside and slid on his haunches to the very edge of the cut, then reared in fright at the depth of the knifelike gulch. Good-naturedly, Jay tried to show him that it was only four feet across, just an easy frog-jump. But the dun bogged his head and began to buck.

It was no place to buck. The rim trembled and, as the horse came down hard from a sunfishing turn, the ground split and fell in a big, crumbling chunk. Jay felt the horse collapse beneath him, yelled and threw his weight where it would help. For an instant, they clawed on the collapsing rim, then scrambled free.

It had been a near thing. A rider could spill into one of those with his horse overturned and wedged on top of him, and they would stay there until the buzzards or coyotes had cleaned them. These places were a little more dangerous than Jay had fully realized, the rims poised and on the verge of falling in many places because of recent heavy rains.

From then on, Jay jumped only the places that were narrow and not deep and rode around the others. A time or two, he saw cow skeletons in the gullies which showed that the beef critters had fallen in and wedged feet up just as perhaps he had come close to doing.

He lined his sights on the smoke ahead and rode for it. It was now thin and practically gone, but he could still see it and believed he was now close to it. And something puzzled him because, except for these rain-cuts, the land was flat and yet he could see nothing where that smoke was; no men nor horses. There was just the faint haze of the dying smoke and it seemed to come from out of the ground.

Had the fire been built in a gully? If so, why was that?

As he drew near, Jay Hicken saw that in fact the smoke came from one of those slitted gullies. Now he remembered that he was on a man-hunt and decided he didn't care to ride right up to that gulch without knowing more about what he poked his nose over. So he angled upgulch a ways, pulled his .45 and fired a warning shot. Plenty of men were touchy about being surprised too sudden.

In a few seconds there came an answering shot, then a faint cry. And Jay was not surprised at all, as he rode over and peered down, to find a man pinned under his upturned horse in there just as had almost happened to himself. From the looks of it, the fellow had been down there for several hours, and he was lucky that the weight of his helpless horse had not crushed him to death.

Jay could see how the man had scratched and clawed frantically to free himself, without other result than to pull crumbling clods down into his face. And he saw how he had managed to reach a clump of dried mesquite with a match and had set fire to that, the only way in which he could send out a signal for help.

All this, Jay Hicken took in at a glance, and was figuring without haste, and yet without delay, on how to get the man out of there as quickly as possible without hurting

him. The best thing, it looked like, would be to dig the earth out from beneath the man with strict care and ease him out from beneath the horse. Should he simply rope the horse and try to drag him off, there was the possibility the animal's body might turn and the iron-shod hoofs churn the man to death.

THE prisoned man was groaning and beginning to curse Jay for not hurrying. But Jay just grinned good-naturedly, tied the dun to a bush and scouted around for a good sharp piece of dried mesquite root to use for a digging tool. He couldn't blame that poor devil for wanting to get out of there immediately.

Using care not to dislodge more crumbling earth, Jay slid down beside the man. He put his bandanna to use in cleaning the dirt away from the man's face and out of his eyes and mouth, then hunkered back on his heels in sudden rigid surprise at what he had uncovered. Twisting his face around, the man was glaring at him wildly from yellow and flaming eyes—the same eyes that Jay had seen over the mask of the bandit who had killed Dad Ringle!

Jay saw that the outlaw had recognized him and was gripped by terror in the belief that, if somehow Jay knew him, he would be left to die in slow agony there beneath his horse. Hot fury in his blood, Jay was on the point of accusing the killer, but checked the angry words on his lips.

Hicken had never been a man to show his feelings on his face, and now his dark features were more than ever a mask. His black eyes told the man nothing and the fellow plainly snatched at the belief that Jay did not know him. He began to curse and whine.

"Get me out of here! I'm sufferin' a heap, hombre! What yuh waitin' for?"

Jay turned his face away, busied himself at sizing up the situation and how best he might release the man.

"Just take it easy," he advised, and his voice told the man nothing of the wild riot of his thoughts. "Yore hips are trapped under the saddle, looks like. I'll have to figger to ease 'em out of there without lettin' the weight of the hoss down more."

He studied the horse, which was wedged down in the earth-crack with its four feet in the air. His heart leaped. It was an unnatural and queer way for a horse to appear, but he saw familiar things at once that told him that this was his own big bay gelding. The horse moved his legs helplessly when Jay spoke, and lifted his head weakly. He had recognized Jay's voice.

Jay picked up the outlaw's gun, which the man had somehow managed to reach and fire in response to Jay's warning shot, and tossed it out of the hole. Then went to work in earnest and with a sort of cold and passionless fury.

All he wanted now was to get this mean killer out as quickly as possible, then let him know his fate. He would give him a fighting chance, let him reach his gun. Because no matter how he hated the man he couldn't just put a bullet between his eyes while he lay helpless.

With the greatest of care, he loosened the earth beneath the man's shoulders and hips and removed it a handful at a time. Now and then he spoke to the bay and quieted his dangerous struggling. And, little by little, no more than an inch at a time, he worked the groaning and sweating outlaw out of his trap.

Then he seized him by the shoulders and suddenly yanked him all the way free just as all of his careful work showed signs of collapse. The horse kicked and settled more deeply in the hole. But now it didn't matter.

The outlaw lay panting and resting for a while, testing his legs and his back and finding them whole. And at last he sat up weakly and reached for his dirt-covered smokes. He rolled a cigarette and Jay could see him pull in his strength with each drag. The man's yellow eyes were now hooded and blank as he grunted his surly thanks and studied Jay without staring.

Jay could read his thoughts. "Who," the man asked himself, "is this rider that looks Injun and has rescued me? He's the hombre I shot in the jail in Cayuse. He don't know me—anyway his face don't show a thing—but how far can I trust that? And what's he doin' here? What's my move now?" Those thoughts were so plain you could hear them, Jay thought.

Jay Hicken's eyes told the man nothing of his own thoughts nor of the hate in his heart.

"Well," he grunted, "seems like yuh're all in a piece and sound. We'll crawl out of here, get a rope on that hoss and drag him to his feet. We'll—"

A shadow moved across them and a man's rough voice warned them to sit without moving.

"Yuh'll do nothin' at all," this voice grated, "till yuh've unbuckled yore gun-belts and crawled up out of there!"

Struck rigid, Jay stared up into the bearded face and cutting gray eyes of a big man who peered down at them over the sights of a carbine. And beside the big man was a leather-featured cowboy who looked equally grim and ready behind a big .45.

Jay and the outlaw alike were pulled automatically to their feet by the deadly threat of those leveled gun-barrels. And, involuntarily, their hands fumbled to unbuckle and drop their gun-belts, this though the outlaw's was already empty of its weapon.

"Come out!" the big man ordered sharply. "No tricks!"

"Look!" Jay began protestingly, and had

his words choked off by the sudden savagery with which the bearded man glared at him and twitched his rifle muzzle toward his chest.

"I ain't got a mite of patience left," the big man growled. "Been huntin' you rustlin' coyotes the best part of several months and now I got yuh I'm plumb itchy with the trigger. Aim to string yuh up or shoot yuh anyhow, and I'd just as soon do it right now!"

JAY HICKEN bit his lip and kept silence for the moment, crawling out of the hole behind the outlaw. This big man, he figured, would be Hank Boyer. And not only fairness and honesty had made him the big cattleman he was. He had never been fearful of backing his rights with hot lead, suddenly and in plentiful amount, it was said.

Boyer surveyed them with contempt when they had crawled out.

"It wasn't yore lucky day when yore smoke led me and Johnny here," he informed them. "You"—he pointed his bearded chin at the yellow-eyed outlaw—"are a man I've sworn to kill on sight. Every man knows what Cat-eye Munro has done to me, the cows he's rustled and the lonely punchers he's murdered. All the range country'll hooraw when it hears of yore death, Cat-eye." He switched his angry gray stare to Jay. "I don't know you, but yuh've signed your own death warrant by runnin' with Cat-eye."

"I'm from Cayuse," Jay Hicken said swiftly. "Though I never knew his name, I come this way to kill Cat-eye, myself. I ain't of his crowd and I've never run with him. He—"

"Yuh bawl like a yellow calf," the outlaw broke him off with a snarl. "I always knew," he told Boyer, "that he'd turn on me and try and talk his way out of trouble when it came."

For an instant, fury that was almost uncontrollable held Jay Hicken in its grip. It made him speechless. The vicious malice in the killer's yellow eyes tied his tongue and turned him rigid. And Boyer plainly took his momentary helplessness as proof of Cat-eye's evil accusation.

"All right," the big man ordered curtly. "Yuh've both said as much as I'll allow. Another peep, or an effort to escape—yuh'll just simply trip my trigger." He jerked his head at his cowboy. "Hit yore saddle, Johnny. You too." His eyes stabbed Jay. "Climb that dun tied over there. The two of yuh can daub ropes on that hoss in the gully and snake him out."

He moved back a few steps, taking Cat-eye Munro with him, and with hawklike intentness watched every move that Jay made.

Jay remembered the gun he had tossed out on the ground, Cat-eye's weapon. He saw from the corner of his eye that it had passed unnoticed by the cowboy, Johnny and Boyer. But he saw, too, that it lay too far to one side for him to reach it. If he should turn toward it, Boyer would instantly discover it and shoot him without hesitation. The only chance he had was to walk steadily and without foolishness, straight to his mustang.

But, even so, wild hope hammered in his brain. If these two men had not taken the time to examine the dun and his equipment, if they had come straight over to peer down into the gully, then there was his spare gun in the saddle-pocket!

His heart hammered wildly, but his face was as still and expressionless as a mask. He could feel the dun trembling as he untied him and gingerly mounted, hoping he wouldn't buck just now. The merest flicker of his eyes showed him the bulge that told that his spare gun was there in its leather pocket. His thigh concealed it as he turned the nervous bronc and rode back to the lip of the gully with a solemn face while unlooping his hemp catch-rope.

Johnny had holstered his .45 and had already tossed down his loop to draw a firm noose around the trapped gelding's hind legs.

"Get another holt on him in the same way," he told Jay. "We can drag him on his back to where it's wider and he can turn."

This was Jay's chance and he knew it. It might not come again just like this. He eased his dun over close to Johnny's horse and gathered his loop, the chill of nervous tension rolling all over his hide like buckshot. He twirled that loop once around his head, then spun it again, preparatory to dropping its circle over his target. But in doing so, and apparently only in clumsiness, he flicked the dun harshly across the face.

The spooky little horse, keyed-up and aware of an overcharge of tension in the air, exploded like a shot. He blew up and leaped madly in the direction Jay's hard hand forced him to. He piled into the Johnny's horse and, with a startled yell, that cowboy and his mount were knocked into the arroyo in a churning heap.

Hank Boyer cursed and yelled, but Jay and his bronc were unable to heed him for the next few seconds. The black-legged mustang put on such an exhibition of plain and fancy bucking as to outdo all previous efforts he had made. It looked as though Jay only tried desperately to stay in the leather and keep from being hurled to the ground. But he had come to know almost every habit and favorite trick of that sunfishing little devil and he managed, while hiding the gesture from the cursing and hesitating Boyer, to reach his hidden gun and fish it from the leather.

When the bearded cattleman saw that weapon, it was already too late. Jay's gun bellowed smoke and flame and its lead rumb-

burned Boyer's horse even while Boyer tried frantically to aim and trigger his own weapon. The big man was hurled from the saddle by his mount's frantic leap.

He struck the ground with such stunning force that he did not move immediately thereafter.

BUT ALL this was also such a chance as Cat-eye Munro had never dreamed he would get. As quick as a flash, he was taking advantage of it, streaking for his own gun on the ground that his eyes had constantly and longingly watched. He was already snatching the weapon from the earth when Jay saw him and, with a final grim effort, controlled the bucking pony and halted him.

He gave no shout of warning, did not try to halt the outlaw's frenzied and vicious effort. He merely smiled coldly and, with final calm and grim satisfaction, sent a bullet crashing through the outlaw's head even as Munro's mad shot split the breeze not far from his own ear. The outlaw gasped once and fell, and did not move again—ever.

Jay Hicken disarmed the nearly unconscious Boyer and the cowboy struggling in the ditch. He fished Johnny out, and when the two were calm and forced to listen, told them his story as simply and honestly as plain words could relate it.

When he had finished and had voluntarily returned their weapons to them, they had no choice but to believe him. It was a fact that, if he had been outlaw, he could have killed them easily and mercilessly. Instead, he was offering to surrender his own gun.

"Yuh can hold me, if yuh like. Yuh can easy check on every word of my story if yuh'll ride to Cayuse." Jay stared for a moment at Munro's dead form. "It just had to be him or me—no matter who else horned in."

Boyer refused to take Jay's gun from him.

"There's times when a man just knows the truth," he grunted, and smiled. "I was old Dad Ringle's friend, too, and I plumb sabe how yuh've felt." He was still smiling soberly as he examined Jay's little dun-colored friend. "That hoss has been a friend to yuh. He's smart and he'll never betray yuh like a man would."

And now, at last, the mask over Jay's dark features was broken and his teeth were a white flash as he grinned and stroked the little bronc's neck.

"He's shore a man-huntin' little mustang! It ain't as if, when he bucks, that he's really tryin' to be mean. He's just bound he won't let yuh forget he's an equal. If he wants, he can go free right here. He's earned it. But if he chooses to stay with me, he'll always be my pard."

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Prospectin' Roy Rankin Runs Smack into Some Claim Jumpers, and Just Has to Prove to Them No Ranny Can be as Dumb as They Think He is—in

RAINBOW'S END

By STEPHEN PAYNE

ONE OF NEXT ISSUE'S BANG-UP ACTION YARNS!

●

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

As the bandit sat as motionless as the stone beneath him, Brennan sprang on him from behind

STAR ON HIS DESK

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Alone and Unarmed, Young Sheriff Kirk Brennan Dares to Pit Himself Against Five Dangerous Lobos of the Owlhoot!

OLD Doc Holly stepped out of the bank, counting money, and walked into a Mexican who stood gawping toward the top of the line of bluffs, red now in the morning sunlight, that reared high close back of town. Holly jerked his gaze upward. He swore, then ran to the sheriff's office.

"Kirk," he said breathlessly to the man at the desk, "you'd never guess who's sittin' his horse in plain sight up there on the rock, so I'll tell you. It's Catclaw Girtman!"

He was young, that sheriff, under twenty-three. His father and his grandfather had held the job before him, and their records had elected him though there had been a good deal of spirited opposition. He felt now that he was in a tough spot, and he was, with the "Catclaw" Girtman gang of holdups back in its old home county once more.

"He's got a white cloth tied to the muzzle of his rifle, Kirk," Doc Holly added.

"Catclaw used to brag that anything was fair if only yuh got by with it, and always was plumb full of tricks," the tall and wolf-lean Kirk Brennan said.

He loosened his six-shooter in its holster as he hurried out to the street.

The man on the bluffs was a big man, full-bearded, with a hawk's eye and a hooked nose. At sight of the young officer he waved his white rag and called down:

"Like to hit off a short truce with yuh, Kirk. My poor daddy has cashed, over in Bledsoe County, and they're shippin' him here to be buried alongside my ma, him to be on the train which gets to town at two this afternoon. We want yuh to let us meet the train and take the coffin away, that's all. If yuh will, we'll swear to leave this county for good tomorrer. Anyhow, we've never bothered here much. How about it, Kirk?"

"Yuh've never bothered here much because yuh figger yuh wanted to use this county as a sort of refuge when yuh was pushed hard in other places," Brennan threw back. "But yuh wasn't safe here none, Catclaw. It was just hard to get a line on yuh, with no fresh trail to foller, here in a county as big as some of the Eastern states!"

"Yeah, reckon so," Girtman said, and shrugged. "Well, how about us comin' in to get the corpse, Kirk? You shorely got that much heart in yuh."

"All right," the young sheriff answered. "But don't wear any guns, come straight to the railroad station and go straight back."

"Bueno," the outlaw leader said, and took off his hat. "We shore thank yuh, Kirk, and mebbe we'll be able to do somethin' for yuh some day. Never can tell. Adios!"

HE waved his hat, pulled his horse around and vanished.

"You couldn't refuse him that, Kirk," the old doctor said. "You'll be on hand at the station, of course, when the two-o'clock comes in."

"Shore," Kirk replied, and added musingly, "Probably I could take a posse and foller 'em to their hang-out, Doc, if I wanted to. Trouble there is, I mebbe wouldn't be quite respectin' the truce."

Doc Holly laughed. "Just like your sheriff daddy and granddaddy. They leaned over backwards, too, trying to be plumb straight. Sometimes I've wondered if it paid."

"Yuh ought to know it does," the younger man said.

At noon Sheriff Brennan walked down to the railroad station and had the agent telegraph the two railroad towns in Bledsoe County to find out whether the body of which Catclaw Girtman had spoken was aboard the train. The answer came ticking back in the affirmative.

At ten minutes of two that afternoon, Kirk and his three deputies—one of them a wizened little old man named "Idaho" Snow, who had served under the other sheriffs named Brennan—went to the station. Since the brief talk between Kirk and Catclaw Girtman was public property, curious townsfolk were there to see the notorious gang when it rode in.

The train rolled up with the combination express-and-baggage car door wide open, the big box in plain sight. And still no Girtman gang.

Brennan ran to the car door, barking at the man inside:

"Yuh shore about what's in that box there?"

"I am now, but a few minutes ago I wasn't," was the nervous answer. "I had to end it around to get it where it is, and I could feel rocks rolling inside. Looks like somebody's been fooled!"

"Which same is me," Kirk Brennan thought hotly. He called to his deputies and with them ran up the street.

"If I'd had any brains a-tall," he thought grimly, "I'd have seen through this and set a trap!"

They went tearing into the bank and there found about what Kirk expected to find. Teller and bookkeeper lay insensible from gun-barrel wallops. The vault door swung open and some twenty thousand dollars was gone. It had been as easy as it was simple, with Main Street practically deserted. Lobo trick, but it had worked.

Doc Holly came on the run and got busy reviving the bookkeeper and the teller. Brennan and his deputies picked up a trail of hoof prints in the alley behind the bank building, got their horses and followed it. The trail led into a trail at the outskirts of town and was lost in a maze of other hoof prints.

Eastward lay grazing land. The holdup gang must have ridden for the much bigger and much wilder western reaches of the county. They'd had to head for one of two passes through the high bluffs line.

"North pass is the highest," creaked little old Deputy Idaho Snow. "Come on, Kirk!"

"Outfoxed again," rapped Kirk, when they reached the entrance to the north pass. "My dad used to say it was the simplest things that fooled a man the quickest, and looks like he was right. By the time we'd get to the south pass, that outfit would have an hour's start on us, and in that time they'd be in rock country where hoof marks would show only to a good tracker pokin' along on foot."

"I'm a good tracker, Kirk," Idaho Snow wheezed.

That was Idaho's chief value as a deputy. Brennan frowned down at his badge, a battered old silver star that had been his father's, then said:

"Yuh can see where I stand now, Ide. As a sheriff I'm only a poor joke. Knew Catclaw Girtman had always bragged about anything bein' fair if yuh could get by with it, yet I did—what I did. I can think of just one way of comin' back, Ide."

"Oughtn't to take it so mis'able, Kirk,"

old Snow said. "Yore dad was the best sheriff I ever knowed, and he never could catch the Girtman outfit. Nobody blamed him, nuther."

"He'd already established hisself a good lawman," Kirk replied, "and didn't have no such opposition as I've got. And he didn't have the chance I just let slip through my fingers, either. Nope, the only way I can prove I've got a right to wear his badge is to nail the whole outlaw gang all by myself, passin' the joke on the Girtman outfit and my enemies."

"A plumb big job," commented Idaho Snow. "If yuh'll excuse me, Kirk, only a young buck, and him not any too wise, would have thought of that!"

"I want you to help me a little at the start," Brennan said evenly. "I want yuh to light out right now and track the gang across the rocky country and get the direction of their hole-up spot, then come in and report to me. Be careful they don't see yuh. Adios, Ide!"

IDAHO rode off on his mission. Kirk Brennan and the other deputies returned to town.

Kirk didn't have to leave his office in order to hear the opposition's verbal flaying. This was exactly what they had expected of him, his enemies said. More than once he throttled a youthful impulse which had to do with his going out to the street and knocking a few men down.

Old Doc Holly came in looking blue.

"Kirk," he said hesitantly, "they're thinking of sending a petition to the governor asking him to appoint somebody in your place. Lots of your former friends would sign it, on account of having lost money in the bank. Busted now, of course, the bank is. Means that you'll lose the sheriff job. Thought you ought to know."

"Thanks, Doc," Brennan said. "Losin' the job ain't all of it, old-timer. I wear the name of Brennan. My dad and my granddad wouldn't rest any more where they lie—shore, you get it, Doc. Well, yuh can tell the wasps out there on the street that they can pull their stingers in, because I aim to surprise 'em half out of their hides and aim to do it right soon. Sounds braggin', I know, but go ahead and tell 'em that!"

Holly shrugged and went out to tell the wasps. . . .

Wizened little Deputy Idaho Snow showed up in town at noon the next day. He found Brennan in his office, and started talking.

"I got their hang-out lined up for yuh, Kirk, all right. But yuh shore are locoed if yuh tackle 'em all by yore lonesome. This Cat Girtman and his cousin, Nep, and the other three of 'em wouldn't be ridin' free today if they wasn't the plumb worst hombres in the entire Southwest!"

"About where is their hole-up spot, Ide?"

Idaho blinked. "Know them big hills other side of the rollin' rock country, with three little creeks runnin' out of 'em, a few miles apart? Well, the gang has follered the middle creek. Yuh got any trick up yore sleeve, Kirk?"

"No, but I aim to watch for my chance and grab one." Brennan got briskly to his feet, then stopped short. "This badge, Idaho—my dad's—it's the heaviest load I ever carried. I'll not wear it any more till I've earned the right."

He put the battered old silver star on his desk and hurried toward the liveryman's for his horse.

Ten minutes later he rode up the main street with many eyes upon him. One bank depositor, just reeling out of the saloon, yelled for all to hear:

"Will yuh look at that? Our younker sheriff's goin' after the Girtman bunch all by hisself! Bet he aims to try and catch 'em in mousetraps. Hey, Kirk! Why don't yuh go the whole hog, and go without a gun?"

Had Brennan not been so mad, he would not have done what he did then.

"I was about to forget," he said, voice tight.

He unbuckled his gun-belt, rode past his office and tossed the heavy belt to old Snow in the doorway.

"Don't yuh follow me, Ide," he ordered the little deputy. "And see that nobody else does."

"It's on yore own head," Idaho said gloomily.

Kirk Brennan rode fast and in two hours, by the sun, was entering the hills canyon that served the middle creek. The average lawman would have hidden his horse and proceeded on foot, doing away with the telltale sounds of iron-shod hoofs on rock. But Kirk Brennan had something in the nature of a plan now, and he figured that boldness would be in his favor. So he kept riding. . . .

Nep Girtman, like his cousin, Catclaw, was a big man. Also like Catclaw, Nep wore a full beard. Their companions were younger, lean and wiry men with slits for mouths and the same for eyes. The sun had gone down, and the five bandits stood at a supper fire that burned not far from a prospector's dilapidated old cabin. This cabin marked the center of a wild, boulder-dotted basin.

Kirk Brennan rode around a boulder the size of a barn, saw them, and jerked up his empty right hand. The outlaws made no move. Their sentinel had hurried in shortly before to report one man coming, and they feared no one man on earth.

With his left hand Kirk reined in before them.

"Anybody follerin' yuh, Kirk?" Catclaw Girtman asked.

"Nobody. Yuh can take my word for that." Brennan eased his right hand down to his saddle-front.

The Girtman leader considered himself smart, and was smart. In point of cold fact he was too smart.

"No gun and no badge," he commented. "Them two cards reads me the rest of the deck. Young sheriff elected on his pa's record. Kicked out because he let a gang make a plumb monkey out of him. Made him so cussed mad he wants to flop over and be a owlhoot hisself. I'm right, Kirk, ain't I?"

BRENNAN grinned narrowly. Catclaw was playing squarely into his hand. His best chance of rounding up the gang lay in joining in, or pretending to do so, and Catclaw had made this easy. He was not going to lie outright, so he merely kept grinning. The cocksure Girtman went on airing his smartness.

"If the authorities didn't take yore gun from yuh when they kicked yuh out, yuh just didn't wear none on account yuh was afraid of bein' drilled on sight. Have much trouble locatin' us?"

"It shore was slow work," Kirk answered.

"If anybody does foller yuh," Girtman said, "yuh'll be the one to shoot him. Buck agin that, and we'll shoot you. Savvy?"

Brennan savvied—with a jolt. Idaho Snow might disobey orders and come sneaking out here!

"Put yore hoss into the rope corral behind the cabin, Kirk," Catclaw went on, "then come back and show us how good yuh can cook. Hustle."

"And tomorrer, Kirk," Nep Girtman said, fingering his beard and winking at his cousin, "yuh can wash up all our clothes."

This was the payoff. The young sheriff was being permitted to join the band—as a slavey! But it didn't rankle much. The big thing was that they were not suspicious, which meant that he could grab the first chance he saw. They'd been nowhere to spend the money they had stolen from the bank. And Brennan wanted to nail them while the money was intact in their possession.

Each of the five had a heavy six-shooter that was never out of his reach. Their one additional weapon was the .44 Winchester that Catclaw had been carrying when he had shown up on the bluffs back of town. The rifle now stood against the outside cabin wall near the door, with a belt of cartridges hanging on its muzzle.

Night caught them finishing supper, night that would be quite dark until moonrise. Brennan followed Nep Girtman and a wiry man in the cabin. Girtman lighted a match, which showed Kirk a pair of built-in bunks, and into one of these crawled Nep. Kirk picked his way between saddles and blankets and piled down on the floor in the blackness. The wiry man did likewise. Soon Catclaw Girtman and another wiry man came in.

"Aw, Nep, nothin' to do but sleep," Catclaw growled as he found his bunk. "Tomorrer we ride."

"To San Carlos and throw us a main bender," said Nep.

"Right," said Catclaw.

Brennan stiffened. San Carlos was not only out of his county, but was across the Border in Mexico.

"So whatever I do," he told himself, "I'll have to do before another sun comes up."

If he could lay hands on that .44 Winchester, and get the drop on them at daybreak when they were woozy with sleep, at least he would have a fighting chance. His sheriff father, he remembered, had never asked for more than that.

Four men had come into the cabin. The fifth would be off somewhere doing sentry duty. One by one the four began snoring. The sounds seemed genuine. But Kirk Brennan lay there staring into the dark for two hours before he dared lift a finger. Then he crept outside, moving an inch or so at a time, making no sound.

The rifle was gone!

Of course, the sentinel had taken the long-reacher. This told Kirk that the sentinel occupied some high point that would give his eyes far coverage after the moon rose.

Kirk waited for moonlight, then found his man on a rock pinnacle. Except that he nodded a little now and then, the bandit sat as motionless as the stone beneath him. Brennan sprang upon him from behind, snatched the man's six-shooter from its scabbard and with the barrel of the outlaw's own weapon knocked him senseless. Using his own and the bandit's neckerchiefs tightly twisted, he tied the fellow's wrists behind him, and tied his ankles to his wrists.

It was the work of only another minute to tear a sleeve from the outlaw's shirt and gag the unconscious sentinel. Kirk then put on both cartridge-belts, holstered the six-shooter, caught up the rifle and made his way cautiously toward the cabin.

Half the night was past, the wait for daybreak would be long. The moon had grown bright. Every boulder and clump of scrub stood out almost sharply enough to be photographed. Brennan wondered whether he hadn't as well tackle it now.

The matter was decided for him. On the pinnacle the sentinel came to, slipped his shirtsleeve gag and started yelling.

"Cat! Hey, Cat, Cat!"

Inside the cabin a sleepy voice mumbled a guttural oath. Instantly Brennan tossed to the still glowing embers of the supper fire a small handful of cartridges that he had snatched from the six-shooter belt. They began exploding in a fine imitation of a

close-up pitched gun battle.

Outlaws came piling through the narrow doorway and into the smoky moonlight. Kirk, in the cabin shadow beside the door, swung the barrel of the Winchester as a steel club—and three of the outlaws dropped like dead men.

But the fourth ducked the rifle-barrel.

"What the tarnation?" he barked.

IT was Catclaw Girtman, and instantly his six-shooter blasted. Kirk Brennan felt bullet-wind in his hair. He had dropped almost too late. He threw himself quickly sideward and out of the acrid powdersmoke, jerked the Winchester up and fired.

Silence closed down. Kirk Brennan had had his fighting chance.

* * *

A shout from old Doc Holly woke the business section of the town that lazy afternoon. Men hurried from saloons and stores to witness the spectacle that had brought the shout. The young sheriff was riding in, herding the Girtman five tied on their horses with the ropes that had made the little corral at outlaw headquarters. A Winchester rifle lay across five six-shooters in front of Brennan. Bellows of mixed amazement and admiration greeted him.

"How'd yuh ever do it, Kirk?" demanded the man who had made sport of Brennan the day before.

"Caught 'em in mouse-traps, of course, like you said," Brennan answered, with a twinkle in his eye.

He halted the cavalcade at the squat jail building, called to wizened little Deputy Idaho Snow:

"Take this twenty thousand dollars to the bank for me, Ide, and hurry back."

Doc Holly came running up.

"Here's some damaged heads for yuh to look after, Doc," Kirk told him, "when we've got 'em safe behind bars. Catclaw Girtman there—I had to shoot him to save myself. Might be he'll have use for the box he had shipped here with rocks in it."

"Yuh call that fair?" Nep Girtman blatted. "Joinin' up with us just to catch us?"

"I shore do, because I didn't lie to yuh," promptly answered Brennan. "Anyhow, who was it always claimed anything was fair if only yuh got by with it?"

The gang was locked up. Soon Doc Holly went looking for Kirk Brennan to tell him that the bandit leader had passed. Kirk sat down at his desk, and, pinned like a target and a dare over his heart, was a battered old silver star.

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No, you can't be there at the dressing station to give him a mother's blessing—a mother's care. All you can do is be thankful that the Army and the Red Cross take such good care of our boys. Yes, and you can see to it that such precious supplies as blood plasma, food and ammunition, and all the thousands of weapons of invasion reach the front in prime condition—ready to do their job.

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Lester's right fist came up holding a long-barreled .45

Nesters Are Poison

By MEL PITZER

Dave Lester risks his bankroll to catch a poker cheat, and then backs up his play with gunsmoke!

THE small cabin had four rooms —two bedrooms, a kitchen and a plainly furnished living room. In the living room, a home-made rocking chair was occupied by a woman who had once been beautiful. But now she was thirty and her face was lined and haggard. Her eyes, once agleam with vivacity and life, had grown dull with unremitting toil. She was clad in a faded calico dress.

Suddenly she stopped mending the socks in her lap and lifted her head to listen.

"John is back, Dave," she called out. "I just heard his horse come into the yard."

Out in the kitchen an oil lamp was casting a bright glow over the worried features of Dave Lester, her husband, as he sat dealing cards at a small table in the center of the room. Lester was big-framed and firm-jawed, but care also had marked his once-handsome features. Now he turned his eyes to the door.

It was flung open and a willowy youth in his twenties, with a flaring breadth of shoulder, entered. Johnny Stevens was Dave's brother-in-law. Stevens closed the door to shut out the wind and rain and laid a hand on Lester's sleeve. There was trouble in Stevens' eyes.

Lester leaned back and stared up at him.

"What kept yuh so late, Johnny?" he asked. "It's nearly midnight. Did yuh sell those steers of mine for five hundred dollars?"

Johnny Stevens put a finger to his lips and nodded toward the living room.

"I suspect Sis is up yet," he muttered softly. "I don't want her to hear what I'm goin' to tell you." His voice dropped lower. "I got the five hundred, Dave. But thinkin' of how bad things are for us, I stopped in at the Lucky Nugget and tried to double it in a poker game. I lost the whole thing."

Dave Lester had been playing soli-

taire. Now he flung down the cards and stood up, towering to his six-foot-three. With grim face he shrugged off young Stevens' hand.

"Yuh tried to double it," he bellowed savagely. "Yuh took my money and lost it at cards? Why, yuh fool, all you know about the game you learned from me. You ruined us is what yuh did. I ought to smash yore face in."

HE half-raised a big fist. Johnny Stevens had backed away from him. He knew he was wrong and took the tongue-lashing silently. Then suddenly Mary Lester was standing between them.

"Stop, stop it, Dave!" she cried. "I—I heard everything. But acting this way won't help matters."

Dave Lester had slumped down before the table once more and listlessly began riffling the pastboards. His hands were shaking as he tried to control the anger seething within him. In spite of everything, he knew that the only thing that Johnny had on his mind while he was sitting in that poker game, was the thought that he could win more and proudly hand it over to his brother-in-law.

The rain outside had changed from a soft patter to a strong downpour. From the roof above Lester's head water began to drop onto the table and gradually form a growing pool before him. Noticing the pool, Lester turned his head and again fixed his eyes on young Johnny Stevens.

"I told yuh to get some tar to fix that roof leak. Why didn't yuh do that?"

"I forgot it," answered the youth huskily. "I was only thinkin' of this here poverty we're in, Dave." Stevens' voice grew stronger as the flame of this new thought took possession of him. "Ever since we came here, Dave, we've been looked down to by the rest of the folks. We're nesters and they don't like nesters. Yuh asked Walt Dolf, the banker, for a loan and he refused it. Boyden, the Eastern syndicate buyer, gives us three dollars a head less for our cattle and only takes 'em because he needs all he can get. Tom Jackson, who owns the big Bar B outfit, has turned the other ranchers against us. They won't let us throw in with them at roundup and brand all our cattle together. He won't let us use his water-hole in the hot weather or his sheltered pastures in the winter like he does the others. I'm sick of it, Dave. Do you hear me, I'm sick of us tryin' to make ends meet."

Lester said nothing. But he knew that every word Johnny Stevens spoke was true. Many a time, in an agony of indecision, he had wondered whether he should give up.

Now Mary Lester came over and stood by her husband.

"John is right, Dave," she said, tonelessly. "Can't you see we're fighting against things we can't beat? We're not wanted around here. They're too powerful."

"I'm sorry about losin' that money, Dave," went on young Stevens. "I learned a lot about poker from you, and I figgered I might win. At first I started to. Dolf was in the game, and Boyden and Jackson. Anse Jollay, the Nugget owner, himself, was sittin' in. He was doin' most of the losin', and I was gettin' ahead. Then, like he always does, Jollay started drinkin' heavy, so heavy he spilled his liquor a couple of times. But the liquor didn't affect the way he has of winnin'. Jollay claims he has better luck when he's drinkin' and it shore seems true because he cleaned us out."

"That hasn't got anythin' to do with it, Johnny," said Lester. "Jollay being in it should have warned yuh. He built the Nugget on what he made in playin' cards. He's as crooked as a dog's hind leg and has plenty of card tricks up his sleeve."

Dave Lester went on with his game of solitaire. Then he tensed and a queer look suddenly twisted his face. He bent lower over the table. With a grim half-smile on his face he slowly laid aside the cards.

Mary Lester went to the sink. Taking a rag, she went over and began to mop up the water on the table which had started to drip to the floor.

"Get a pan, Johnny," she ordered, "and put it on the table to catch the water. Dave can repair the leak tomorrow."

At her words Dave Lester stood up. "I got to think things over, Mary. What Johnny and you said is true. Us nesters ain't liked. Anyway, I'm goin' to try and hang on a bit longer. Let's all turn in."

LESTER went into the bedroom with a slight smile of hope on his face.

The next day, in the afternoon, Mary Lester went to mind the two children of a neighbor who planned to take his wife on a visit. She intended to stay there overnight, which suited Dave Lester's plans fine. Young Johnny Stevens had a lot of plowing to do. This would keep him busy until dark.

After his wife had left, Lester told young Johnny that he was going into town and not to worry if he didn't arrive home until late. Without saying any more, Lester harnessed his team to the light buckboard and headed for town. A little later he stepped into the Stockmen's Bank and was finally ushered into the presence of the president, Walt Dolf. The banker was a tall, florid-faced man who had been a cattleman before he went into the banking business. A frown drew down his bushy brows, as Lester entered.

"Don't look so gloomy, Walt," said the nester. "I didn't come here to ask yuh for a loan again. I came to find out if yuh'd like to get some money back yuh lost. "

Walt motioned to a chair. "Sit down, now that you're here," he said. "What's this about me losing some money?"

Lester took the proffered seat and, leaned forward.

"Look here, Walt, I know that yuh don't like nesters. But aside from that I know that you are a fair and square man. Last night yuh sat in a poker game with my brother-in-law, Johnny Stevens. Jackson the rancher, also, was playin' and the cattle-buyer, Jack Boyden. Anson Jollay was in it, too. He sort of emptied the pocketbooks of you boys, so I heard."

Walt Dolf nodded. "You heard right," he said.

"Well, Walt, that money that Johnny lost was mine. I can't afford to lose it and I got an idea Jollay won it by playin' crooked. I could stick a gun in his ribs and get it back again, if I wanted to. Or I could go to the sheriff. But the way I figger I think I can prove that Jollay plays crooked cards. Also, if I can get in the game with you gents playin', you'll be the same as witnesses for me when I get the goods on the Nugget owner.

"You and Jackson are members of the Citizens' Committee, and that's all that's needed to put Jollay out of business. Yuh know as well as I do he's been a reef that a lot of young fellers around here have smashed themselves on. They've lost their hard-earned cash gamblin' in his place. Now what do you think about what I said?"

Walt Dolf, head of the Citizen's Committee, slammed his fist on his desk.

"Lester," he answered, "I agree with every word you said. It may be all right for the older set to get some amusement in the Nugget, but the young 'uns can't buck games like that when the sky's the limit. You hit me in a spot where I'm soft, Dave, and I'll tell you something. The only reason that Jackson, Boyden and I have been playin' poker with Jollay is to try and get somethin' on him. We've been hoping to prove that he's dishonest. The mayor and the sheriff are waiting to hear from us and they'll do the rest."

Walt Dolf leaned back in his swivel chair and, lifting a finger, stabbed it at Lester.

"Dave," he went on, "you prove that Jollay is running a crooked poker game and you'll be doin' this community a great service."

"I won't say I can do it," broke in the nester, "but I got a hunch how Jollay works. I know it's never been found he uses marked cards. Mebbe it's somethin' else. Suppose we get in a little poker game tonight. Do you think yuh can arrange it, Walt?"

"Whenever my friends and I want to play, Jollay is willing to relieve us of our money," grinned the banker.

"All right, then, Walt. How about me meetin' you boys there about nine o'clock tonight? Then yuh can work it so's I can get in on the game. I don't want to tell yuh how I might be able to get the proof on Jollay up until it works out. If it don't work out, it'll be my own money I lose."

They talked a bit longer and Lester left. He ate at the small restaurant and the rest of the time he hung around the town making some purchases for the ranch. He had taken a couple of hundred dollars along with him, practically all the money he had, so that he could enter the game.

At nine o'clock he strode into the Lucky Nugget. It was still quite early.

Only a couple of men stood at the bar. But at the lower end loafed a tall, gaunt-faced, beak-nosed man. His black, restless eyes were in startlingly contrast to the pallor of his face. He had just taken a new deck of cards from a box. This fellow was Anson Jollay. Now his eyes flickered to Lester and he gave a slight nod. Through the door of a back room stepped Walt Dolf, a cigar fuming in his mouth.

"Hello, there, Lester," he called, loudly. "Want to lose some of your cash. We're just starting a little game of poker."

"Shore, I'll take a hand," answered the nester.

There were four big round tables in this room, their tops gleaming darkly with polish. At one of them sat two other men. One of them was Joe Jackson, white-haired and heavy-jowled, with work-rounded shoulders. The other was Jack Boyden, slight, thin-faced and partly bald. He was the syndicate buyer. They greeted Lester. Then Dolf and Jollay came over and sat down.

Over this table was a glaring light, its rays directed downward from above by a shade. Jollay lowered the lamp until it put the faces of the men in darkness and left only the player's hands in view.

"Can't read a man's expression this way, Lester," chuckled Jollay, "and everyone'll have a fair chance. You can read a lot by a man's face, you know."

The game started and, as usual, the sky was the limit. At intervals someone raked in a pot. After a while Jollay started to boost the betting. An hour passed. The stakes had become higher, but each of the players had taken in a pot now and then. Then came the time when the pot held seven hundred dollars and Dave Lester found himself with four sevens. The others had thrown in their cards.

Anse Jollay saw himself looking down at an ace full on a pair of queens. To him this was a beautiful sight—in fact, they practically whispered in his ear that he was seven hundred dollars richer than before. So he raised his bets lavishly, because Anson Jollay was honest up to a certain point. But if he fell down on a hand like the one staring up at him, it was a time to use other ways and means. At last he saw Lester, and the sevens which the other spread out. Lester raked in the pot and Anse Jollay called for a quart of whisky.

He began to fill the little ounce and a quarter glass from the big bottle and downed his drinks often as the game proceeded. Twice he spilled liquor and began to talk in a mumbling tone. But his luck began to change. He started winning steadily. At last he won a particularly big pot.

"Funny thing with me," he said. "The more I drink the better my luck gets. When I'm sober I have no luck at all. It's been that way all my life."

He kept winning and then, when he was about to deal for cards called, in his usual slow fumbling way, Dave Lester pushed back his chair. His voice was cold and brittle when he spoke.

"Jollay, I'm playin' a new kind of hand in this game and here it is."

Lester's right fist flashed up over the table and in it was a long-barreled forty-five, pointing straight across at the saloon owner. Magically six-guns came into the hands of Jackson, Dolf and Boyden. All were trained on Jollay.

"What's the idea, Lester?" snapped Jollay. "And you other gents. What are yuh tryin' to do?"

"I'm sayin' that yuh're playin' a crooked game of cards, Jollay, and I aim to prove it. Watch him, boys."

Lester leaped up and swiftly went around to Jollay's chair. "All right, Anse," he went on, "I've got my gun right in your back. One bad move and I'll pull the trigger. Now get up! Dolf, you change chairs with Jollay here. I want to show yuh somethin'."

The banker did as he was told. "Now, Dolf," continued the nester, "take a couple of cards and deal 'em to Jackson like as if he was callin' for 'em. They're upside down in yore hand, Dolf. Yuh can't see what they are. But look into that little pool of spilled liquor as yuh're dealin' and tell me what yuh see."

WALT DOLF uttered an oath. "Why, Lester," he explained, "in this liquor that Jollay spilled, with the light shining the way it does, I can see every card I'm dealing out. It's a regular mirror."

"All right," went on Lester, "Now let Jackson and Boyden try it, and keep yore gun on Jollay."

The others followed Lester's instructions.

"Shore thing," growled the rancher, "I can see every card I'm dealin'."

"That's why he wanted the light low, gents, so yuh couldn't see him lookin' down into that liquid mirror. He could watch the cards and knew when to bet and when to stay out. He just faked being drunk."

Now Lester pulled up the light on its pulley and then they could all see the fearful look of guilt on Anson Jollay's face. And it was as the glaring light struck their faces that he made his play.

Leaping backward, he drew a gun and darted toward an open window. The gun in his hand flamed. Lester felt a pain burn across his ribs. Jollay's gun roared again and Jackson, letting out a cry, grabbed at his shoulder. Walt Dolf returned the fire but missed. Then Lester took careful aim and thumbed the hammer of his Colt.

Jollay, with his right leg over the window-sill, fell backward and crashed to the floor. Lester dived forward and kicked the gun from his loosened fingers. The gambler was cursing and holding his right hip with both his hands. After a few moments of confusion, it was found that Jackson had a clean hole in his shoulder and wasn't badly hurt.

JOLLAY mumbled something about cutting them in on the profits of his gambling.

Walking over, Lester reached inside the gambler's coat and brought out a well-filled wallet, from which he extracted five hundred dollars. Then Lester flung the wallet down.

"This is my money. Johnny Stevens lost it last night. You other gents can have Jollay."

"We'll notify the sheriff and the mayor," said Dolf. "I'm in favor of preferring charges against him and putting him in prison for a long term. How about it, boys? One charge will be shooting with intent to kill."

Jackson and Boyden agreed that this should be done. "And when he comes out," said the rancher, "if he ever shows up in this town, we'll give him a coat of tar and feathers."

Heads had begun poking in through the doorway. Walt Dolf ordered one of the watchers to get the sheriff and a doctor.

"We'll let the doctor work on you first, Jackson," said the banker. "Then he can patch up Jollay."

He turned now to Dave Lester and held out his hand. "Dave," said the banker, "I thank you for showing up this crook. It was clever of you thinking he might be using a trick like that. But how did you get onto it?"

"That rain we had last night," chuckled the nester, "I was sittin' at a table in my cabin with nothin' to do but play solitaire. My roof leaked an' the rain, comin' through, made a pool of water in front of me on the table. With the bright light of the lamp I was usin' shinin' on it, I could see the fronts of the cards reflected when I was handlin' them. At the same time young Johnny was tellin' me as how Jollay started spillin' his liquor an' winnin'. I figgered that with a brighter light an' everythin', the thing might work, and it did. Well, gents, I guess I'll be leavin' you all now."

Walt Dolf coughed. "Say Lester—er—come into town tomorrow, will you? Stop off at the bank. I believe I can arrange that thousand dollar loan you wanted and give it to you right away."

"Fine," blurted Jackson. "And listen here, Dave. Come round-up, you and yore outfit throw in with the rest of the boys, and we'll brand and ship together. Guess I can let yuh have some sheltered pasture in the winter and anything else yuh want."

"Top prices on all yore stock from now on, Davy," drawled the buyer.

Dave Lester opened his mouth to blurt forth his thanks. But a mist jumped into his eyes and, instead, he left the Lucky Nugget with his shoulders a bit more squared and his head a trifle higher. Life, he felt sure, from now on held a bright future.

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Nobody knows what's coming when the Germans and the Japs are licked. Perhaps we'll have good times. Okay. You'll be sitting pretty. Perhaps we'll have bad times. Then they're sure to hit hardest on the guy with nothing saved.

The best thing you can do for your country right now is not to buy a thing you can get along without. That helps keep prices down, heads off inflation, helps to insure good times after the war.

And the best thing you can do for your own sake, brother, if there *should* be a depression ahead, is to get your finances organized on a sound basis of paid-up debts—and have a little money laid by to see you through!

●

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Claws of Perdition

By GUNNISON STEELE

Seeking hidden gold, Sonora Drake held Adam Boone helpless!

SONORA DRAKE crossed the Red Desert at night, escaping into the lofty Tamarack Hills. Here in the high country, where the wind blew cool and clean, in a world of perpetual twilight, where mighty firs fashioned a roof high above, he felt that he would be safe from the law.

For Sonora Drake was a killer, a human wolf. Down in the lowlands town of Sentinel he had robbed a bank and killed a man, and now he was running. For four days he rode

SONORA DRAKE

the uplands, awed by their vastness and aloofness. Then, when his grub was gone and he was feeling the pangs of hunger—he came unexpectedly upon Adam Boone's cabin.

Adam Boone was a runty, gray-bearded little gent, oddly dwarfed by the towering forests that hemmed in his cabin. He welcomed Sonora Drake eagerly.

"Six months since I've seen a human," he chuckled. "A feller gets lonesome."

"So yuh live here all alone?" Sonora asked.

"Just me and my friends."

"Friends?" Sonora said sharply.

The runty oldster chuckled again, gesturing at the shadowy forests that hemmed the clearing in which the cabin huddled. "Old Nero there, and the deer and muskrats. They're all my friends."

Sonora grunted and dismounted, looking carefully about, suddenly aware of the deep silence that had gripped the vicinity as he approached. A deer had crashed away through the underbrush. A squirrel that had been chattering in a nearby tree, had quieted. A huge black bear stood at the edge of the clearing. The bear had been nosing among some leaves, but now it stood motionless, watching the big killer with suspicious, unblinking eyes.

"Friends, huh?" Sonora growled.

"Nero won't hurt you, unless you bother him. He just don't know you. You timber cruisin' up here?"

"That's right," Sonora lied. "And I'm hungry. You got anything to eat, old man?"

"Plenty. Come on inside."

SONORA DRAKE tied his horse and followed Adam Boone into the cabin. He hadn't decided what course to pursue. The oldster had shown no sign of suspecting who or what he was. Maybe he could hole up here until it was safe to return to the lowlands.

The one room was rudely furnished, but clean. Besides the stove, it contained a table, a couple of chairs and a bureau, all homemade. A bunk, with the blankets that covered it trailing to the floor, was in a corner of the room. Adam Boone indicated a chair against the wall across the room from the bunk.

"Set down over there, Mister. What'd you say your name was?"

"Lake—John Lake," the killer said.

The oldster started perceptibly. He looked closely at Sonora Drake, his eyes narrowing down—and in that instant Sonora Drake knew that further lying would be useless. He jerked out his gun, lining it on the oldster, and his black eyes held a cold, feral light.

He sneered. "So that's it. You know me, don't you?"

Adam Boone didn't seem scared.

"Shore, I know you," he said quietly. "You're Sonora Drake, and you've killed half a dozen men. I've got an old reward flyer over there in the bureau drawer, with your name and picture on it, which I picked up last time I was in Sentinel. You runnin' from the law?"

"I was. But I give that posse the slip when I quit the desert and come off up here. If you know me, old man, yuh know I won't stand

for any foolishness. You try any tricks and yuh'll get the same medicine I gave that old goat down there in the Sentinel Bank. He reached into a drawer, like mebbe he had a gun there, and I let him have it. It was kind of funny, the way his toes curled up."

Adam grew very still.

"Not a fat, bald little gent with longhorn mustaches?" he whispered.

"That's right. You know him?"

"Old Sam Giles," Adam said, a dazed look in his pale eyes. "Me and Sam used to be pardners. For thirty years we roamed the deserts and mountains, lookin' for gold. Sam was the best pard any man ever had. But finally Sam met a girl, and married, and he took to bankin'. I been alone since then, but I allus visited Sam once a year, and we'd talk over old times. I—you shore Sam's dead?"

"Yep, I'm shore," Sonora said callously. "He ought to have had better sense than to reach into that drawer. He just made me shoot him, and that stirred up a wasp nest, and I had to run without a dollar of the bank's money. I was lucky to get away alive."

"It ain't right," Adam muttered. "Sam wouldn't harm a fly. Somethin' ought to happen to anyone that'd kill him like that."

"Yuh better get such ideas out of yore head. You got a gun, old man?"

The oldster nodded toward a long-barreled old rifle on the wall. "Only that. Hardly ever need a gun. Everything around here is my friend."

Sonora Drake got up and took the rifle. Then he closed and latched the door. "Just in case that blasted bear takes a notion to come in here and jump me," he grinned.

"You aim to do me like you did pore Sam?"

"I'll be decidin' about that, while yuh cook up some grub. Get busy now. And remember I'll be settin' right here in this chair with a gun in my hand!"

Adam Boone offered no further protest. He went silently about kindling a fire in the stove. He seemed stunned and bewildered by the news that his old pard Sam Giles was dead. He must have known Sonora Drake meant to kill him, but he still showed no fear.

FROM a window Sonora could see the huge bear as it overturned a log and pawed under it for grubs. He noticed the red deer had returned to the clearing edge and stood there motionless, eyeing the cabin. A couple of squirrels capered across the clearing. "Friends, bosh!" he sneered. "What good will they do you now, old man?"

Adam's manner was dejected. "They're all I'll have, now that Sam is gone. I guess I won't even need that little gold I—"

He stopped talking abruptly. Sonora Drake's eyes had narrow. "Gold? You pannin' gold in that creek out yonder?"

"Never heard of any gold bein' found up here, did you?" Adam muttered.

[*Turn page*]

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"Yes, I did! By gosh, that's it! I been wonderin' why yuh was stuck off in a place like this. That means yuh've got a nugget cache. Where is it?"

"Look, Drake, I haven't found much gold."

"Don't lie to me, yuh old buzzard. Where is the gold?"

"Ain't you done enough, what with murderin' old Sam?" the oldster said miserably. "I'm gettin' old, and I need something to keep me."

"Stop blubberin'!" Sonora Drake got to his feet. His black eyes shone with a greedy, wicked light. He jabbed the gun at Adam. "Speak quick, old man, or I'll kill yuh and find the cache myself. Where is it?"

Adam's thin shoulders slumped with defeat.

"Over there under the bunk," he said.

Sonora Drake strode quickly across to the bunk. He stooped, lifted the trailing blankets.

There was a hissing, snarling, spitting sound, and a tawny thunderbolt streaked from under the bunk. Sonora lunged backward with a startled yell. But the "thunderbolt" had fastened itself on Sonora's leg—and then, with incredible speed, still snarling and spitting, it scaled upward and perched between Sonora's shoulder blades. There, with fang and claw, it went to work furiously on the killer's neck and face.

Sonora had dropped his gun, and he was screaming with pain and surprise. Frantically, he grabbed at the tawny creature that was ripping and mauling at him with such cyclonic savagery. But the thunderbolt clung, slashing at Sonora's hands and arms. Panic seized the big outlaw. He lunged wildly at the spot where he thought the door was; he smashed into the wall and it flung him back. Then he stumbled over a chair and fell to the floor, where he rolled over and over, screaming.

Adam had the gun. And now he leaped to the door and flung it open. Abruptly the thunderbolt left Sonora and, still yowling angrily, streaked out the door and across the clearing.

"All right, killer—you can get up now," Adam said calmly. "You're just clawed up some, which ain't as bad as you'll get when I take you down to Sentinel!"

Sonora Drake sat up, whimpering, his shirt almost torn from his body, his face and neck bloody and ripped.

"What was that cussed thing?" he moaned.

"Just a she-bobcat, which sneaked in here one day when I went off and left the door open, got under the bunk and started her a family. I let her stay, mainly because ain't nothin' on earth tougher or worse-humored than a bobcat with young kittens. That's why I been sleepin' out in the tool-shed for the last week, afraid to get close to the bunk."

"What about yore gold cache?" Sonora Drake whined.

Old Adam chuckled.

"That was just a trick I figured out to get you over to the bunk. Only thing I got up here worth money is my friends!"

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

no chance of winning he simply mysteriously withdrew from the battle, and the smoothest Indians could not follow him, but soon he would just bob up again ready for another battle.

The Chisholm Trail

When we started this trail jaunt however, we intended to start meandering southward from Dodge City, Kansas, that rough, tough, famous, first Western cattle market, the town that figured greatly in the early days of the cattle industry and to which ran the famous old Chisholm Trail.

The Chisholm Trail was the trail over which thousands and thousands of longhorn cattle were driven from Texas and the Southwest to market at the then Western terminus of the railroad. It came out of Texas, then a wild and sparsely settled state, through the Indian Territory which was if anything still wilder.

Hundreds of stories of tragedy, of adventure, of courage and of romance have been told about this trail, and while the old trail has given way to paved highways, the trail itself having passed out of existence, the stories will live on and on.

Sometimes, coming north along the Chisholm Trail, the trail drivers would meet men who lived, not by earning, but by taking from those who were weaker or not so well armed.

Loyal Cowboys

No greater loyalty has ever been shown, for the boss or the firm, than that shown by the cowboy trail drivers who worked for a much smaller salary per month than is now usually paid per week, and yet with that small salary never shirked when riding into the face of danger. They risked their lives almost every day, and would stand pat in the face of odds and fight to the death if necessary to protect the cattle of the man from whom they drew their wages.

It is natural then, that those men along the trail with cattle, while they were always glad to meet other human beings, were cautious whenever strangers came around and looked upon each stranger with suspicion until they had measured him by their own scale.

The majority of those old trail drivers were great character readers. They had to be for their own safety.

Were we following the old Chisholm Trail south from Dodge City, we would pass a little east of Coffeyville, Kansas, where the Dalton Gang of outlaws made things lively for quite a while. They added many pages to Oklahoma's outlaw history. The principals of the gang were Grat and Bob Dal-

[Turn page]

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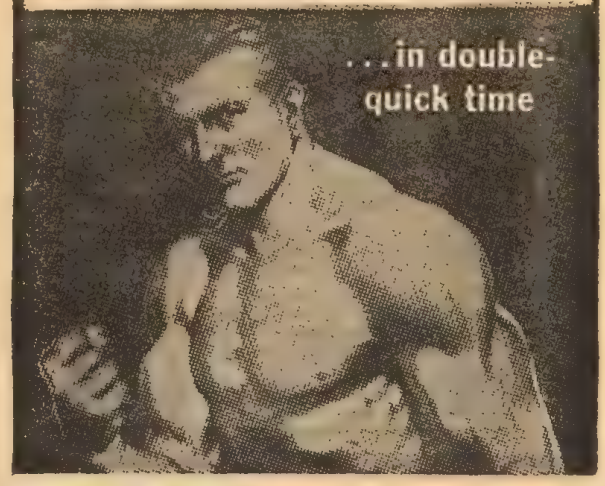

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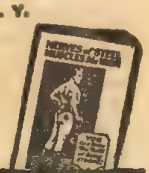

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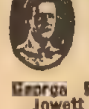

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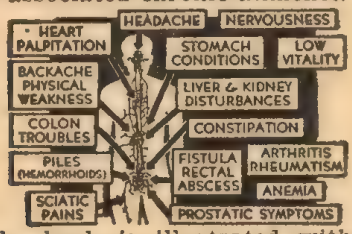

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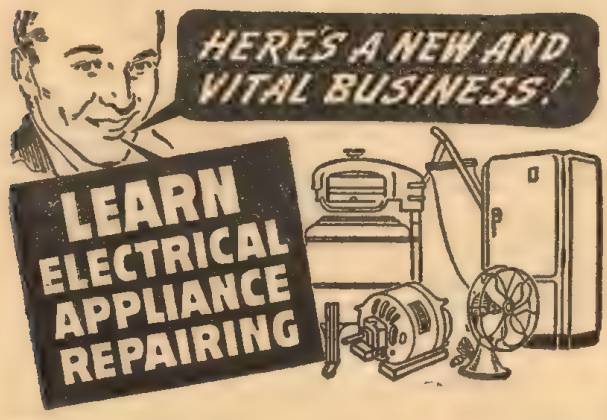

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ton. Emmett, the younger brother, did not count as a principal of the outlaw gang, he was too young and simply went along and helped, but took no part in the planning. Other prominent members of the gang were Bill Doolin, Dick Broadwell, Bill Powers and Black-faced Charlie Bryant.

The mother of the Dalton boys was a Younger, a relative of the Younger side of the famous Missouri outlaw band, the James-Younger gang, and although it has been three quarters of a century the names of the Youngers and Jesse and Frank James still live and are mentioned whenever old-times or early outlaws are talked about.

The Dalton Gang committed many depredations, along and on both sides of the Chisholm Trail that we are now riding. They robbed banks, trains, stores, murdered whoever got in their way when they were in the act of robbery or escaping from the law.

This went on until Bob Dalton, who planned most of the robberies, seemed to get over-ambitious and wanted to stage a bank holdup that would eclipse anything ever perpetrated by the famous Younger-James clan.

A Double Holdup

Bob Dalton thought that robbing one bank in a town was just ordinary, but to rob two banks in the same town at the same time would be an outstanding achievement, one that would make his name live on and on. It did, and while he lost his life in the attempt to rob two banks at one time, he achieved the purpose of making his name live on and on through the pages of outlawry.

The banks selected for the double holdup were banks of their own hometown, Coffeyville. The robbery was unsuccessful and the Dalton Gang was practically wiped out. But no braver deed was ever attempted by outlaw or lawman than that of Emmett Dalton, the kid of the gang. Who turned back in the face of deadly gunfire in an attempt to drag his mortally wounded older brother Bob up and onto his own horse after Bob had fallen before the furious gunfire of the citizens, who seemed to have been tipped off in advance and who were shooting at the outlaws from every direction.

It is similar to the story of the end of many other men who lived by force of the six-gun. One mistake—it may be the first, and it is apt to be the last!

Pawnee Bill's Adventure

As we ride on down the once famous trail into Oklahoma, just a little to the west of our trail is the section where the Bert Casey gang of outlaws operated and where later another noted Oklahoma outlaw operated and caused many a widespread manhunt. He was Ben Cravens.

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It was also into this same section that the late Major Gordon W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill) rode when little more than a boy, with a string of pack mules loaded with hides for trading at an Indian Post. There were few white men in that section at the time except the Indian agents and outlaws.

What an adventure it must have been for young "Pawnee Bill"! In a storm he lost his way, darkness was coming on and he, a young fellow, was alone in a wild and rough country. A stranger appeared on the scene, found that the youngster was lost, led the way to a camp, and invited the young man to stay for the night. Here again the character reading of the pioneer came into play.

Tough Hombres

Pawnee Bill knew that the men at the camp were no ordinary cattlemen, or men of any ordinary business. There were quite a number of rough-looking men in the camp, and while they were civil enough to their overnight guest, they engaged in conversation with him very little, but gathered in groups to themselves where they carried on their conversation in low tones. This bespoke that their talk was not for his ears.

Pawnee Bill was given directions for finding the Indian Post the next morning, and was well on his way when he learned that he had spent the night in the camp of the famous outlaw James gang, and although he had been well treated he never forgot the experience.

To go up the Chisholm Trail with a trail herd was a great adventure to the average

[*Turn page*]

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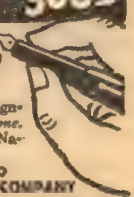

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cowpuncher, but they knew that it was no picnic. It meant long and hard riding, long weary hours in the saddle, and plenty of danger. There are some men who are never satisfied unless they are courting a new adventure, they seem not to worry about the danger of any occupation or calling, and the trail drivers were of this class.

Usually the trail drivers were recruited at whatever point or section the herd originated. Their salary was anywhere from forty dollars to sixty dollars per month, according to their ability and experience and the amount of equipment they furnished.

If they furnished their own horses they usually drew a little higher salary than if they did not furnish their own mounts, yet many owners of cattle herds did not like to have the trail drivers furnish their own mounts, because in such cases a rider might spare his horse and partially neglect the cattle.

Rounding Up the Herd

The trail drivers usually helped round up the herd of cattle and get them ready for the trail. It did not take long when once out upon the trail to accustom men and cattle alike to the routine.

By daylight every morning the cattle would be up and grazing away from their bed grounds, and all hands except the last guard (those who went on the last shift guard and who would start the cattle grazing toward the north end of the trail) would have eaten breakfast.

Then, while the last guard ate, the rest of the crew would be stringing the cattle out. By the time these men had the herd strung out in good traveling formation the men left behind would be up in their places with the herd.

All day long the men rode slowly along, riding hard only when it was necessary to head off an animal that had a desire to leave the herd. At night the outfit was usually divided into three guards.

Normally this arrangement left several hours for sleep, but if the weather was bad or threatened to be bad, all hands were put on guard, and there was no sleep, and usually the trail boss or owner would sometimes laughingly point out to the men that they could sleep all the next winter.

Horse Thieves

Different outfits had different methods of handling the saddle horses at night. With some outfits a *remudero,* or wrangler—"night-hawk" he was often called—herded the horses; other outfits had no night-herder for the horses but simply hobbled them. But no matter how the horses were handled, horse thieves were likely to make away with some of them on a dark night.

If they were herded, a thief could slip in among them and drift a few out; if they were hobbled, a thief could catch what he wanted, cut the hobbles, and drive or lead them away. A night wrangler meant an extra man on the payroll, and a lot of the outfits that went up the trail were short on cash and used as few hands as possible.

Uncle Dan Stewart, who went up the trail several times, told me of a time when two young men rode into his camp just as the men were hobbling their horses before eating supper. They were invited to 'light, unsaddle, and eat.

They were very accommodating and helped the men hobble the horses, but they did not unsaddle, stating that they had a long way to go and would have to be making tracks as soon as they had a bite to eat. A little after dark they pulled out and Uncle Dan said that they were nice looking young fellows and so never aroused any suspicion during their short stay in the camp.

When the remuda was rounded up the next morning, six horses were missing; and by a strange coincidence all the horses missing belonged to the boss or owner of the herd, the two thieves, having helped with the hobbling of the horses, had spotted those that belonged to individual trail drivers, and perhaps had just a little fraternal feeling toward the men who drove cattle on their own horses.

Indians on the Trail

In crossing the Indian Territory and driving herds up the Chisholm Trail, the drivers

[*Turn page*]

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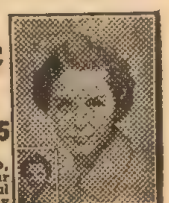

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almost invariably ran into Indians who either demanded or begged for beef, and to turn down their request could easily lead to trouble.

On one trip up the trail a cattleman by the name of Bill Jackman picked up a big steer that by the brand he knew belonged to Col. Ike Pryor, who had gone up the trail with a herd sometime before. Jackman's intentions were good and honest and he intended to take the steer along with his herd and return it to Pryor at Dodge City, but while passing through the Indian Territory a fat Osage Indian with a gang of warriors rode up to the herd and asked for the chief. Jackman was pointed out. Then the Indian gravely handed him a slip of paper.

Unfolding the paper which the Indian had handed to him Jackman read as follows:

"To the Trail bosses: This is a good Indian. I know him personally. Give him beef and you will have no trouble getting through his country. Ike Pryor."

The Indian got beef, but it was Pryor's steer that was given him, and all the crew of trail drivers considered it a great joke, and each in turn when they met Pryor kidded him about the note.

It was a great trail, that Chisholm Trail, and those men who drove the trail herds of longhorns were real he-men. That's one of the reasons we have such a great West today. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE was trouble on the Rocking M ranch. For eight days and nights Dan Mallory was missing. He started out for town one morning and then completely disappeared. His dead horse was found but there was no trace of the ranch owner.

At the ranch his motherless daughter waited, as did old "Hoodoo" Turner, foreman of the outfit for the past fourteen years. They were still hoping that Dan Mallory would return—and that night their hopes were realized. The owner of the Rocking M came back.

But he was a changed man. There was a bunch of hard-eyed gunslicks with him and Dan Mallory announced that Slade Corrigan, the leader of the new arrivals, was the new half-owner of the ranch and he and his men were all joining the outfit. Ray Abbott, the tough little killer who was Corrigan's right hand man, listened silently as Mallory made the announcement.

From outside there came the sudden roaring of guns. Ray Abbott stepped to the lamp on the table and blew it out, plunging the room into darkness. He then hurried out into the hall and blew out the lamp there. In the darkness the front door closed and Abbott bolted it from the inside.

"The Box H outfit must have trailed us here." Corrigan's deep voice sounded ironical in the blackness. "Too bad—reckon they didn't like us stealin' that herd and drivin' it back into the mountains."

"Gunslicks—rustlers!" exclaimed Hoodoo Turner. "All I got to say is yuh shore picked yoreself some fine partners, Boss!"

The guns outside were louder. From a window in another room came the roar of Abbott's guns as he fired at the men of Jerry Holcomb's Box H outfit. Corrigan was dimly outlined against the night light as he moved to an open window.

Hoodoo Turner drew his gun and aimed at the back of the man at the window. Dan Mallory seemed to sense what the foreman intended to do, for the ranch owner moved close to Turner and caught his gun arm.

"Don't, Hoodoo," Mallory whispered. "That won't do any good. This is too big for us to handle. Yuh've got to get away—try and find the one man who can help us. I know he's in the valley for I seen him just before sunset tonight."

"Who is that, Boss?" Turner asked softly as Mallory released his arm. "What man?"

"The Masked Rider," whispered Mallory as Corrigan fired from the window. "Find him! This is just the start of what's gonna happen here and I can do nothin' to stop it. Nothin', I tell yuh!"

"Dad!" wailed Sally out of the darkness. "Make these men stop fighting the Box H. Jerry Holcomb is out there—he'll be killed and I—I love him!"

"Get rifles, Mallory," commanded Corrigan without turning from the window. "This is yore fight as well as mine, partner!"

That is the dramatic start of GHOST GUNS, the complete book-length Wayne Morgan novel by Donald Bayne Hobart in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

It was easier for Hoodoo Turner to find the Masked Rider than the old foreman had even dared to hope. For the black-clad wanderer heard the sound of shooting coming from the Rocking M and galloped to the ranch to investigate.

The Masked Rider found a chance to talk to Turner after Jerry Holcomb's outfit had ceased their attack on the spread and gone away. The Masked Rider learned that a pass through the mountains which was part of Rocking M property was the only way the ranchers in the valley could get their herds to the railroad town miles to the north. If Mallory's new outfit refused to let the herds through the pass there would be plenty of trouble.

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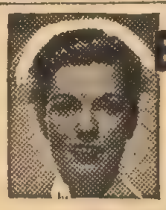

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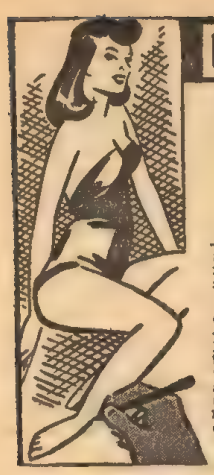

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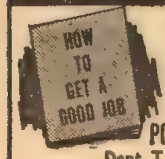

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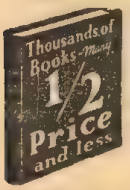

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OUR LETTER BOX

WE ARE eager to know the opinions of all of our readers, and for that reason your letters and postcards are important to us. Do write us and tell us which stories you found the most enjoyable in the magazine, and about those which may not have appealed to you for some reason or another.

Here are a few excerpts from the many letters we have been receiving recently:

I have been a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN for about 3 years. I like it better than any other magazine. I like the novels very much. I liked GUNPOWDER STRIP, LOST VALLEY, DEVIL'S RANGE, DEAD MAN'S RANCH and GUNS OF THE MALPAIS. Keep up the good work.
—Tommy Bell, El Dorado, Ark.

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for some time and if there is any better magazine I have not yet seen it. I especially like Larry A. Harris' novels. Give us some more like LOST VALLEY and DEAD MAN'S RANCH.
—Herman King, Wolf Creek, W. Va.

I have been a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN for sometime and I think it really is an interesting magazine. Naturally there are some stories I like better than others, but I like most of them.
—Jewell Robison, Crab Orchard, Tenn.

Maybe it is because I like short stories better than long novels—but there are times when the Masked Rider just doesn't appeal to me. It seems like he is able to do too much for just one man. Maybe I'm wrong—but you wanted my opinion—so here it is.
—David Blake, Philadelphia, Pa.

I enjoy your magazine very much. The stories certainly are action packed. I like Wayne Morgan best of all. He certainly is a real hero. But like most heroes I would like to see him have a little romance along with all his exciting adventures. I find that I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN better than most any western magazine I have read.
—Mary L. Elmore, Hope, Michigan.

Thanks for all of your letters—and let's hear from more of our readers. That's all for now. Please remember to address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you all next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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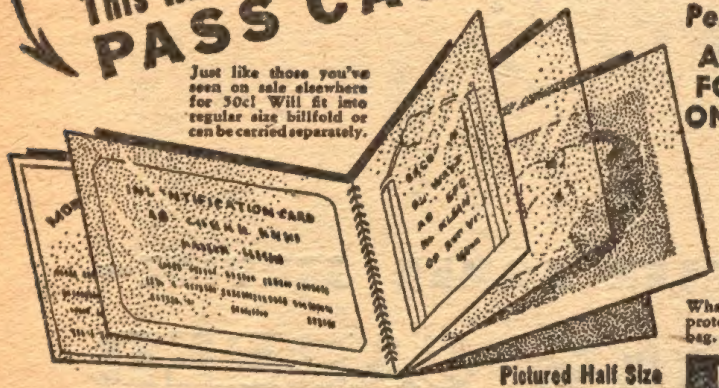

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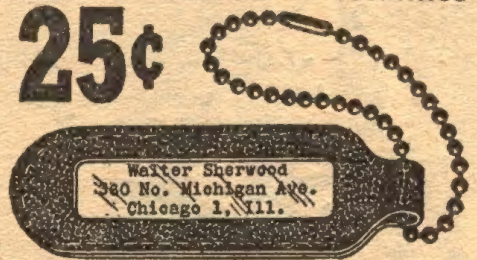

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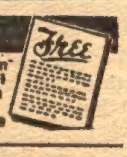

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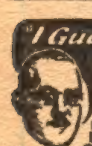

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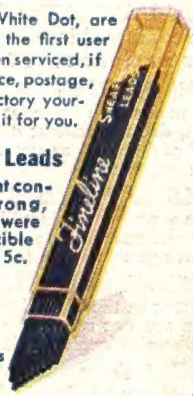

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